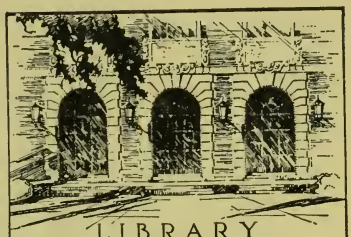

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A NOVEL.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

HELEN DICKENS,

Author of "Wild Wood," &c.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
T. CAUTLEY NEWBY, PUBLISHER,
30, WELBECK STREET, CAVENDISH SQUARE.
1874.
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THE MILL WHEEL.

MARSHALL
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CHAPTER I.

SPLASH! splash! and the spray flies up, as round, round goes the water wheel. Never ceasing day or night, it is like the wheel of Life, or the brook which says:—"Men may come and men may go, but I go on for ever." Aye, true! Men have gone, and men have come, joy and sorrow, winter and summer; those who one day watched as I am watching now will never watch again: all things are changed or silent, but thou, mill wheel, art going still!

There's the very duck, or one just like it, that wended her way among the rushes years ago, followed by the pretty yellow "bid-bids." "Quack! quack!" cries the mother, and off they all waddle along the bank, intent on catching flies. And I lean on the rail of the old mill and watch the wheel that turns for ever. Oh, life! if one could only step on one side and watch the stream rush by, how much we should learn!

But in the contest, every one is taking heed for his own safety, and does not regard the struggles of his sisters or brothers. Here is a stick coming down the river, whirling round and round, there is no stopping it, and it must be drawn under the wheel. How suggestive of some poor young life fighting for a footing, but too weak to stand against the current! And so it is, day after day; souls are lost, swept down, like that stick, with the tide!

The water mill is situated on the banks of

a picturesque river that ripples through the estate of Zeigleheath, in the possession of one Sir Bevis Rudkin, Baronet. It is a famous place for hills and glades, like most parts of Sussex, but Moordart is especially beautiful, and in that favoured place generations of Rudkins had lived and died. People called them a blessed race, but there is a difference of opinion about that. They certainly were a comely set, both male and female, but they had a "skeleton in the house," like most other people. Good gifts God had given them, but alas! the devil, as usual, held out his hand for a share.

The land for miles round was theirs, dotted here and there with many a rustic dwelling. The woods were rich in game and in songsters, the river was full of fish, and the gardens abounded in fruits and flowers.

There is Zeigleheath, a little to your right; the dining-room window commands a view of the old water mill, which is empty now, and

the quaint old place almost a ruin. The stage at the side is falling, and the planks are divided, but it is still used by fishers, and sometimes by lovers. It is a lonely spot, and the rosy village maids do not generally select it for their moonlight rambles, and, for another reason, it is a good step from the High Street. The station (a late addition) is three miles off, and a lumbering old coach goes every morning to take passengers to the nine o'clock train, and returns for them at night, or rather in the evening, at half-past five. An apoplectic guard blows a great horn as it drags itself over the stones and upsets the digestion of its inmates.

Nevertheless it is considered by the Moordarters a *great* convenience and benefit. Moordart has, I regret to say, *not* improved "with every shining hour," it has stood still in manners and customs, as well as in appearance. But for those who admire nature and antiquity, they cannot do better than pay Moordart a visit this summer. They need not

distress themselves about getting any of Houbigant's gloves, or a bonnet from Madame Mouceau—the best accompaniments to a week's rustication at Moordart are some cotton dresses and a big umbrella. I question whether the natives would understand a parasol, in all probability they would take it for a dried butterfly or a spider's web.

But Zeigleheath is appealing to my conscience now, it says:—"Am *I* not worthy of notice?" Yes, indeed! more than worthy. Its majestic bearing and solidity *command* notice.

A fine old place is Zeigleheath! the only fear I have is lest I should not be able to do it justice. The House was erected by one of the first Rudkins who fought on British soil. They came over with William the Conqueror, so tradition says, and rode by his side in the fight. They were father and son, pure Normans, who left their native land to follow their liege lord, and were the means of found-

ing here, on our shores, a mighty, kingly race. Of the two who came over, but one survived the struggle at Hastings—the son, Wildebrand, and to him the Conqueror gave Moordart, then a poor fishing hamlet between the hills.

There, in sight of the sea, whose billows had tossed him and his father on the Sussex shore, Wildebrand erected himself a house, and called it Zeigleheath, and there he reigned as a monarch among his vassals. He did not go back to Normandy for his wife: if he had a love he left her there. Any-way, he married one Mildred, a lady of supreme beauty and high rank, the only child of a powerful Saxon Thane, whose estate and title it had pleased William to spare. So when his tried friend and faithful servant Wildebrand Rudkin fell in love with the beautiful Lady Mildred, the Conqueror swept down all obstacles, made him a rich man, and graced the nuptials with his presence.

It was a case of the lion and the lamb, or the eagle and the dove. The gentle Mildred, with her milk-white skin and golden hair, was no fit mate for the iron-limbed, eagle-eyed, heavy browed Norman. And she shrank from him, and feared him when she reached her lonely home. The wind was too strong for the gentle creature; so after a brief span of wedded life, only three short years, her oft-repeated sighs mingled with the song of the restless sea, and she slept the sleep of the weary. But she left something behind her, a lovely boy, who, as he grew old enough, spent his time swinging from rock to rock bird-nesting.

Legend informs us that the Lady Mildred threw herself into the silvery sea one moon-light night, because she had not married her love, and Sir Wildebrand was harsh and cruel to the poor young thing. The fishermen always said the Lady Mildred's spirit appeared to them before a storm,

and whenever the White Lady was said to have stood on the Eagle's Cliff, no boats put to sea, however calm the day. It was the Rudkin curse, and, strange to say, it clung to them. Each knight married a Saxon woman as fair as fair could be; none fancied a dark woman—it seemed their fate—and in each family there were always a dark and a fair one. It was a queer coincidence, but a true one.

We need not follow the doings of every holder of Zeigleheath. They died off, each at his time; some met their end by violence, others according to age or disease.

It will answer our purpose to skip over many, many years, and resume the thread of the story in the decline of the last baronet's time—Sir Alexander. He, like his predecessors, was a handsome man (that was part of the Rudkin inheritance, and inevitably fell to the lot of them all), and wedded a fair lady of noble birth, by whom he had three

children, two sons and a daughter—Sir Bevis, the present baronet; Denis Roger, in the army; and Clorinda.

Zeigleheath, the original house built by Sir Wildebrand, had never been touched, but it had been added to according to the taste and requirements of its many owners till now it had reached a great size, without much form or regularity; in fact, it could be called no particular style or design, but a variety of ideas bunched together. Nevertheless, it was a remarkably fine massive building and decidedly unique. So for once that old adage, "Too many cooks spoil the broth," proved untrue.

Sir Wildebrand's house is called "Sir Wildebrand's Tower." It is a most appropriate name, for it looks like a lighthouse with a round tower fixed on the top. It is the highest portion of the building, and commands a fine view of the sea. The sea seems to be necessary to the peace and happiness of the

Rudkins; they are amphibious animals, and derive great nourishment from sniffing the salt breeze.

Sir Alexander and Lady Dorothy lived to a good old age, and made many improvements at Zeigleheath, which had also been continued by their son, Sir Bevis. He did not evince any desire to marry, but his younger brother, Denis Roger, married, pretty early, a lovely sweet creature with eyes like a gazelle's, and smooth hair. She was but a poor governess, of good family but straitened circumstances. He met her at the house of one of his brother officers, whose sisters she was teaching, and her amiability and loveliness won the young soldier's heart. Lilian Lafone proved indeed a treasure, though she had neither money nor grand relations to recommend her, but she possessed a cultivated mind, high principles, and a tender, loving heart, which, in my opinion, are things more to be desired than any other.

Denis Rudkin idolised his young wife, and it was a hard struggle to let her go, and say "Thy will be done," when Death stretched out his icy hand. For days Colonel Rudkin would not see the wee specimen of humanity that had robbed him of his love, and its feeble cries were uttered unheeded by him. It was a senseless, unjust sort of revenge ; but men are seldom just in any acute sorrow—they lack the simple, clinging trust that is God's gift to woman.

It takes time to soften a man's heart, and so it was with Colonel Rudkin. His heart was still hard when the time for christening baby arrived, and when the old nurse ventured to carry the forlorn little spark of life into his presence, she found him sitting moodily before the fire, with his eldest child Adeline, a pretty little dimpled fairy of six summers, playing with his dark hair. He had no idea what the child was doing, and she was enjoying herself after real baby fashion.

The old woman rather hesitated: her master's bronzed face had the Rudkin frown, and his mouth was stiffly set under the thick moustache. But he came to the rescue with a not unkindly—

"Well, nurse?"

"If you please, sir, what name do you wish given to baby" (here a faint cry emanated from the bundle of pink flannel lying across nurse's arm)? "To-morrow is the day to christen her."

He glanced at the bundle and then at the holder in a mystified manner; then he pushed little Adeline off immediately, and answered—

"What you like; fix it amongst yourselves."

It was now nurse's turn to feel puzzled.

"But, sir, you must be pleased to have a fancy; we might give it a name you would disapprove."

"Not at all; call it anything you like; it is a girl, you say?"

"Yes, sir, a little girl. If I might make so bold, sir, may it be called after its mother?"

Up jumped the big man, uttering what sounded extremely like an oath.

"No, it may *not* be called after its mother, there will never be another Lilian, and I will not have her name bandied about; who can tell whether the child will grow like its mother? No, no, call it Jane!"

Tears were standing in the old servant's eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Denis! don't be so hard; it was the Lord's doing, not this poor lamb's. It will never grow like my dear mistress, for it has not her face; it is just your image, sir—just what you was at its age. Indeed, I might have you in my arms again. Look at it, sir, you have not seen it yet."

The nurse advanced a step or two, and pulled the bit of pink flannel off the babe's face. The father could not longer refuse to see his

child, and he bent over the small creature. Nurse was perfectly correct; the little face, so still and passive, was a curious and wonderful reproduction of the handsome man's of thirty-four. There was the same intelligent dark-grey eye, gazing up in astonishment at its newly-found father; the same broad brow, the same well-shaped nose and mouth, the same clear, dark skin. It was a thin, wiry child, with rather an old face—it could not be called a beautiful child, much less a pretty one—yet there was something attractive about it, something that prevented its being overlooked. Colonel Rudkin stroked the funny little brown hands that were rolled up like walnuts; nurse told him they were always like that, it was born so.

He smiled, and murmured softly—

"Poor little thing! poor little thing! How pleased Lilian would have been with the baby just like me! That was her only grief when Adeline came, that she could trace

no likeness in her to me. And this little one just my image, and she not here to see it."

"She knows all about it, Mr. Denis, bless you!" sobbed nurse, "I only hope it's not hurt her, seeing as how you've never looked at it before. Ah, me! Well, will you name it, please, sir?"

"Yes, but not 'Lilian,' there is no resemblance to my angel wife in that little pinched, brown face. Call it 'Renie Dorothy'—'Renie,' after Charles Renie, for it was at his house I found its mother, and 'Dorothy' after my mother."

He turned away, heaved a great sigh, and old nurse left the room, taking pretty Adeline with her.

What a contrast between the two children? the one a sweet little creature like its mother, the other a brown, old-fashioned baby, not wanted, nor really loved; in fact, regarded by its father as the means of his bereavement and sorrow.

"Has master named it, Nurse?" asked a pretty girl with black ribbons in her cap.

"Yes, Mary, he has, thank goodness. But such a queer name, at least the first part of it."

"Why, what?"

"Renie Dorothy."

"Good gracious! Why I never heard such a name. Renie!"

"Yes, that's it sure enough. I have made no mistake, which maybe you are thinking, Mary; but it's after the Renies, of Polsden, where master met my dear young mistress. And 'Dorothy' is after its grandmother, Lady Rudkin. Well, well, I do wish as it would get fatter, poor motherless little lamb. It is no manner of use asking master to let me get it a wet nurse, he won't hear of it. I heard him say to Sir Bevis when he was over, only yesterday, that his child should not have a foster mother, come what would, so we must just do as well as we can."

"I'll tell you what it is, Nurse, it's my belief that master would not take on over much if it died."

"*For shame!* Mary Barber; how can you bring yourself to say such a thing to *me* of my dear master, as I nursed, like this?"

Pretty Mary only tossed her dainty head, and did not seem in the least abashed.

"Oh! I daresay it's all very well for *you;* but as *I* didn't nurse him I am not troubled with those feelings, and I just uses my senses, that's all. Here's this poor little innocent as is to be christened to-morrow, and have such a heathenish name. Why couldn't he have given it a name fit for a Christian. Arabeller Berlinder, or Sophiar Amander. He has never seen it till to-day, never come near the nursery, and it crying fit to burst, many a time. I don't believe he would ever have remembered Miss Adeline if I had not got her ready and sent her down. But as for this poor little thing, it might have

been dead and buried twenty times for anything he knew or cared. Now, if you call *that* naturalness, I've done."

"And a good job you have. How's a young, inexperienced thing like you to know about naturalness, I should like to know? Take my advice, Mary Barber, and talk about things as you *do* understand, and leave them alone as you don't."

"Thank you, Nurse; but I've got my feelings, like most other young women, I suppose, and my thoughts too, and you can't prevent me using 'em neither. If *I* had a husband, I shouldn't like to think as he'd slight and neglect my baby when I was stiff and cold." And Mary thought of a certain athletic young carpenter, Jem Muggins by name, who was cutting laths at that very instant in the tool-house.

But her softened feelings were destined to be of short duration, they vanished like chaff before the rage that burst from Nurse, as she

defended Colonel Rudkin's conduct. Mary felt the smart cap lift from her head, and ventured to "hope as Nurse was not offended by her free speaking."

"Offended! No, Mary, but I cannot listen to such talk. You know nothing about it, and don't understand men's natures. The master is a hard, stern man, and missis's death is like pulling his heart out; he is not accustomed to it yet, poor fellow! Wait till you get a husband, and then, perhaps, you'll be better able to pass your opinion; meanwhile, keep your tongue quiet about master and his affairs. I never knew much good come of either free speaking or free thinking. Those who speak before they think are fools. Just see if that milk's warm, and if so, give me the feeding bottle."

The morrow arrived, and the baby was duly christened "Renie Dorothy." It lived and grew, and also, in answer to nurse's oft-repeated prayer, got a trifle plumper. When

it was three years old, a healthy, intelligent child, Colonel Rudkin accepted an appointment as Governor of one of our Colonies, and went, leaving it and Adeline (a pretty child of nine), to the care of their uncle, Sir Bevis, and a governess.

Sir Bevis was sorely grieved at his brother's going, and also that he would not allow him to have Adeline and Renie at Zeigleheath. Sir Bevis was a bachelor, and had taken a great liking to his two little nieces, especially Renie, whom he called "the little papoose." When asked, "Who are you?" she frequently replied, "Nutle's papoose." But Colonel Rudkin was firm.

"No, Bevis, my children must remain in my house while I have one. Dove Park is so close to Zeigleheath that a day need never pass without you seeing the little things. I have left you their sole guardian, and if anything happens to me, you will be a father to them, Bevis?"

"I will, Denis, so help me God! I have got neither chick nor child of my own, and it is almost too late to think about it now, so your children shall be mine; but keep a brave heart, and God speed you home soon."

CHAPTER II.

Colonel Rudkin sailed, and his girls lived at Dove Park with their governess, Miss Webb, a good, sensible Christian gentlewoman, who strove to do her duty piously to the very letter, and cultivated the good seed sown in their hearts as if they had been her own children.

Miss Webb was not particularly old; Colonel Rudkin did not desire his daughters' companion and friend to be a stiff, rigid woman, with every crease ironed out. He sought for a clever, reasonable lady, one who, remember-

ing her own young days, could make allowances for the innocent frolics of his children; not a woman who regarded every bit of nonsense and mischief as a deadly sin, and punished it as such. Their education was just as well looked after, and their moral training quite as effective as if a code of rules and a birch rod had adorned the mantel-piece in the school-room. Their uncle rarely allowed a day to pass without seeing them, and their home was as much Zeigleheath as Dove Park, they were the children of both places.

Miss Webb had a pleasant time of it; she was respected, loved by her pupils, and well treated. How different from the lot of most poor governesses! I don't know a class more to be pitied. They are engaged on the lowest terms, and expected to dress well, and to know everything—English, French, music, German, drawing, &c., &c., &c., all of which they, poor suffering mortals! are to impart to blocks of girls for the exorbitant sum of thirty pounds

a year. Is it to be marvelled at that there are so many incompetent governesses? Do you think any draper would sell silk velvet at the price of cotton? Does knowledge cost nothing to acquire? or is there so much of it going that it can be had for next to nothing?

The nursery governess, or, more properly, the nursery drudge, slaves her life away for fifteen pounds a-year, and often not that. I have named the highest figures for both. There are some exceptions, I grant, but they are few and far between.

I wonder what the world would do without governesses? What would become of the many fine helpless mothers if they could not get someone to take charge of the little Turks and be answerable for every bruise on the ill-behaved little wretches? Because, you know, it is the proper thing to talk of "our governess," after a certain time; "nurse" cannot be with them for ever. Besides, for thirty pounds you get all your family educated,

whether the unfortunate creature undertook to do it or not, and the cost would be considerably more to send them to school. And how are these ladies treated (for many of them are ladies born and bred, vastly superior to the vulgar dame whose children they are trying to knock something into) ? Disgracefully, shamefully, put to sleep in a cold, barely-furnished apartment, left to drag out the evenings in a dark, cheerless, schoolroom, with a handful of fire in the grate, or, more probably, none at all, correcting carelessly executed exercises till eleven and twelve. If not there, she is in the drawing-room, in attendance on the young ladies. There she is regarded as a newly-discovered specimen of something with which they are not acquainted by the females, and through their eye-glasses by the males. She is commanded to sing, and she is commanded to play, and will perhaps have the pleasure of hearing some brainless fool of a Sir Somebody Something, with his face all

askew, or his legs at cross-purposes, call her a "doosed putty garl," after which she is permitted to sit down, whereupon the female next to her, with wonderful delicacy of feeling, commences a very animated discourse at the top of her voice on the qualities and shortcomings of "our last governess," and her experience of them in general.

She is subjected to all manner of insults and slights, from the mistress of the house to her youngest pupil. She is treated by the butler with pompous indifference, and by the rest of the servants with open disdain. She is reduced to the level of a servant herself; the most to be pitied of them all. She is worked harder, worse paid and treated than any lady's maid. And yet she is a gentlewoman, and well educated! How is this evil to be remedied?

By the lady of the house (I had nearly written "woman"); it is she who must set a better example, and then her servants will

copy it. She ought to treat her daughters' governess with courtesy and respect; does she not trust their morals to her keeping? then she must repose confidence in her, and deem her worthy. One would, doubtless, suppose it was so, but it is my painful duty to say that such is not the case, and I will show you why. Not one half the women who hold rank as ladies ever think about it at all; being decidedly hazy in that region themselves, they don't feel equal to taking anyone else to task. They have accomplished the one grand end and aim of life, namely, matrimony, and, having done that, they consider it their bounden duty to set upon everyone else who is a shade or two lower in position than themselves.

The idea of giving precedence to ability never for a moment occurs to them, they look upon a governess as a machine, reported by last owner to do its work well, to be had for so much money, and quite as necessary in an

establishment where there are children as a patent knife-cleaner. If they paid a visit to the school-room during the lessons, they would be no wiser; did the governess tell the children that Jericho was situated on the coast of France, or that Belle Island was one of the Hebrides!

Ignorance is the mainspring of the evil, they cannot test their powers like a maid's, so they institute a series of snubbings to keep the young person in her proper place, and prevent their own deficiencies from becoming palpable. An educated woman and a lady is not afraid of meeting one of her own sex on any ground, or any terms. But when you see a woman behave towards another as if she thought her red hot, you may be very sure there is something amiss. It is like a baby that is kept an unusual time in long clothes —there is something the matter with that child, it has either no feet or too many toes.

A life of toil, privation and insult, is the lot

of nearly every governess; shame be it to every Englishman and woman! We have members of Parliament who hold meetings and speechify by the hour, even incite their listeners to riot, so enthusiastic and earnest are they in their cause. But none has yet taken the cause of the poor governess by the hand; why don't they use their eloquence to befriend her? True, there are homes for governesses, for which they must pay; and, then, what are they? Go and see them; picture your own child a governess, friendless and lonely, with nothing to turn to but a "Home."

When a girl is left alone (as many are, or nearly so) in the wide world, what is she to do? There are but three reputable callings —those of a governess, a companion, and a situation in a shop, unless she has some special talent; and, even if she has, before her work is accomplished she may die of starvation, for no one will take an unknown

light by the hand. So the governess or companion is the safest. She commences the struggle, and toils on, seldom able to save a penny, and praying day and night not to be afflicted with any sickness.

If she does not find a gentleman generous enough to take a poor wife, and one who has been a governess (and I am free to confess they are few, and the word "governess" sticks in their throat like a plum), we again see her toiling on with silvered hair, no richer, no poorer, nothing to show for her years of work but that she—lives. My God! is it for that babies are born and dragged up? I have just one wish: may everyone who can afford to keep a governess, and who treats her unkindly, lose all their money at one stroke, and may *their* daughters be turned adrift on the world to get their own bread, after being brought up to work at nothing. May they suffer every slight and insult; may they walk far and meet with rudeness and

disappointment; may they go to bed each night with a wet pillow and a sad heart, and may every day seem longer than the last!

A girl who gets her livelihood without having need to blush is to be commended and admired, not looked down upon and insulted. Surely some home with comforts befitting a gentlewoman might be granted them, some little taste of peace after their years of toil, while waiting for the blessed calm of God's rest to fall upon them.

Miss Webb was not one of those unhappy workers; her home was a pleasant one. Colonel Rudkin, perceiving that he had obtained a lady, and a well-educated instructress for his children, caused her to be respected and well treated by his household as by himself, and Sir Bevis carried out his desires on that subject as well as on all others.

Time slipped by, and Adeline and Renie planted their feet further down in the sands of time; they were both well-grown and well-

educated. There was a marked difference between the sisters; indeed, so little did they resemble one another that there might have existed no relationship whatever. In the first place, there was a gap of six years, sufficient to prevent Adeline's taking a lively interest in the amusements of Renie when she began to play. Then there was a wide difference in their dispositions, as well as in their forms and faces.

Adeline was quite wonderful in the way she used her delicate fingers; she was perfectly refined and excessively pretty, but endued with by no means a powerful intellect. Her pastime and delight consisted in making bonnets and dresses, and doing fancy work. She kept a milliner's shop for years with the assistance of a cupboard and the nursery table. And it was by no means a childish establishment; it was equal, if not superior, to the first milliner's in Regent Street for taste and elegance. It was the hand of a

genius that arranged the flowers so artistically, making the colours blend so effectively, yet without offending the eye. Everything was finished; there was not an angle or abrupt termination to anything, and every single article was of a design and style peculiarly her own.

Adeline Rudkin was a perfect little lady, refined to the last atom of her composition. It is rarely so, even with royalty. One half the grace and elegance displayed in the highest circles, is the result only of training and years of "polishing." No doubt they were very ordinary children in their days of pinafores, and very desirous of saying "was" instead of "were." It is not always that we see the really genuine article fresh from the hand of nature.

But nature did everything for Adeline; there was no Professor Delamere required to teach her how to turn her toes out—they turned out of themselves when she com-

menced to walk. She was not fat; there was not an ounce of flesh on the graceful body more than was needed to cover the exquisitely turned little bones. Her feet and hands were two sizes smaller than anyone else's; her voice a tone lower, and her mouth full of beautiful teeth. Her skin was soft and fair, her hair a light reddish brown, her almond-shaped eyes a decided tone of blue, with pencilled eyebrows and long curling lashes of dark brown. She was a delicate child, and disposed to be irritable, especially with her sister. But that was not much to be wondered at, Renie being, in her own way, extremely provoking.

The brown baby had developed into a plump brown child, with an expanded nose, and a mouth set like a vice. Adeline's hair was arranged in long ringlets, but Renie, poor child, was made even a greater fright than nature had intended her to be. Her meagre supply of that article, which was of a

dark brown colour, and perfectly lank, was cropped quite short at the back, very much after the prison cut, while the sides were permitted to grow, and screwed up into three short stiff curls, very much in size and shape like black puddings.

She was awkward and unwieldly in every movement, and persisted in stumping along on her heels. She never troubled anyone to get her any fruit, for she could climb as well as any boy, and swing from bough to bough like an ourang outang. The result of all these gymnastics was that she developed into a great broad-shouldered, strong-limbed, thick-skinned girl without a particle of grace or refinement. Her arms, from constant exposure to the seasons, got completely covered with long hairs, as also did her legs, and her hands, which were not very much mis-shapen, were always a mass of cuts and scratches, and the nails bitten to the quick.

I need scarcely tell you that this child had

a temper, and a large one too. But it did not always show, though when it did it left some marks of its visit. On one occasion, when a very young child, not able to talk, she was in the kitchen with her nurse, and one of the men brought in a rabbit, intended, doubtless, as a present for Miss Adeline, who never favoured them with a visit. He put the little creature down, and attracted baby's attention to it. She set up a shout of delight and trotted towards it, whereupon the frightened animal retreated into a corner. Renie jabbered to it, and sputtered in its face, but it would not come out. So the little Turk raised the drumstick, which was her constant companion, and passionately beat the rabbit to death.

The servants made no attempt to stop her; they were either lost in delight or in wonderment at the child's temper, so Renie beat on undisturbed, and battered the life out of the little creature. Yet she loved animals dearly,

and always had a family of pups and kittens following her, to whom she was devoted. She nearly lost one of her most promising disciples one day—a tabby kitten, named "Ophelia."

The little pet was following its mistress about the grounds, and accidentally fell into a drain that was open. Renie suddenly missed it, and rightly conjectured what had become of it. She did not commence to cry, as most children would do, and call for assistance, but set off as fast her short legs would take her to where the gardener was mowing, and, seizing his long wooden rake, returned, and pushing it down the drain, raked Ophelia up again. Adeline happened to pass at the moment, and seeing her with the dirty kitten clasped to her heart, poked the finger of scorn at her. But it mattered not to Renie; she had saved her puss.

Now is it to be wondered at that Renie and Adeline did not agree? They were not in

the least like each other. And, again, there was a line drawn between them which could never be rubbed out. Adeline was pretty, while Renie was ugly, and she knew it. When the time for new clothes arrived, it was Adeline who got them; Renie had hers made out of her sister's old ones; she rarely had a perfectly new frock.

No doubt Miss Webb and old nurse meant very well, and thought Renie would never notice it; but she did, and thought about it, too. Never one word did she utter, though, and they little guessed what was working in her mind.

Though six years younger than Adeline, her mind was more matured, and more capable of serious thought. She knew she was ugly, and, like most plain people, she had a passionate and intense longing and love for everything that was beautiful. To hold in her hand one of Adeline's pretty things was to her a keen joy. She had no idea how it

was made, or of making it, but she admired and appreciated it. This Adeline would rarely allow her to do. If she came into the room while Adeline was holding shop and ventured to touch anything, she was met with a peevish—

"Please to put my things down, Renie, and keep your clumsy, dirty fingers off the table."

If Renie did not immediately comply (and sometimes the temper would rise and she'd feel inclined to toss the trumpery thing on the ground) Adeline would say, with the ever-ready tears in her eyes—

"Miss Webb, will you speak to Renie? She is spoiling my blue bonnet, her hands are so dirty!"

Miss Webb would say, quietly—

"Don't tease Adeline, Renie, and go to nurse and get your hands washed."

Renie would put the doll's bonnet down, and walk out of the room without saying a

word, never go near nurse, but straight to some quiet corner of the grounds. She knew she had handled the bit of finery far more tenderly than its owner would have done, and that her hands were perfectly clean. It was only one of Adeline's many ways of getting her out of the room. Adeline would never play with her, and when she did condescend to, Renie was never permitted to touch anything, she always acted as servant, and churned, or performed some other menial duty.

All this while Renie got more reserved and independent, and hated her sister from the bottom of her heart, she was the plague of her existence, and the cause of her ever being punished or getting into disgrace. It was a kind Providence that watched over Adeline, for had she fallen into a pit, Renie Dorothy would never have pulled her out.

Such was the hue things wore at Dove Park for nine years, during which time

Colonel Rudkin wrote pleasing letters to his children, and Adeline wrote him neat, precise, ladylike little epistles in return. Renie's were decided specimens; such penmanship was never before seen, it could be deciphered as well upside down as any other way. It used to rend good Miss Webb's heart to send them, and she was obliged to confess to Sir Bevis, with tears in her eyes, that she could *not* teach Renie to write, and it was not the child's fault, she tried her best to copy, but it seemed an impossibility.

Sir Bevis laughed, and asked to see some of Renie's own writing, the way she wrote when alone. Miss Webb brought him a part of a letter to her papa.

"What hieroglyphics!" exclaimed the worthy baronet; "I never saw their equal; such eastern y's! Well, don't be cast down, Miss Webb, my advice is, don't attempt to teach her any more, she will manage perfectly well without your assistance. This is her

natural hand, and her character is so strong that no one can alter it. There is one recommendation about it—it is original; you will not find another hand like this in a hurry."

"Indeed, I am sure not, Sir Bevis, nor another child; Renie is most peculiar. But a quiet, good girl, with great ability and power. It is no trouble to her to learn her lessons, and now she is actually beginning to despise them. There are only two things that she does not get on with, and those are arithmetic and French. The former I cannot instruct her in, and she so thoroughly detests it. I have noticed, during my experience, that those girls who have talent for figures can scarcely ever do anything else well, no other talent seems to live and grow to any size with arithmetic. Of course Renie does her best, but she might as well devote the time to some other study, for it is no benefit to her. Then, again, her French—she is no linguist;

if she is ever to speak French properly she must reside some time in the country; and Renie will do nothing unless she can do it well."

"Very wise, too, but the child does not want for sense. I am glad you have told me this, Miss Webb. The arithmetic I desire persevered with; it is a capital exercise for the mind, but French is not, in my eyes, so very important. She can do very well without it. And how about Adeline?—she grows prettier every day."

"Yes, she does, Sir Bevis, and her carriage and manners are faultless. I wish Renie would improve in that respect. Adeline is a sweet girl, but we must not expect nearly so much from her as from Renie—they are totally different—one is to be led, the other to lead."

Miss Webb told the truth in her periodical reports to their uncle, and it was wise and just of her to do it.

CHAPTER III.

At the expiration of nine years, when Adeline was eighteen, and Renie twelve, Colonel Rudkin wrote to say he was coming home that autumn. Great were the preparations, for the house was not half used by Miss Webb and her pupils, and the servants wanted adding to, as well as various other things.

Adeline and Renie were both longing to see their papa, and Miss Webb was anxious to hear what he thought of them, and whether he would consider that she had fulfilled her trust properly.

At length the long looked-for day arrived, and about a quarter past four the Zeigleheath carriage drove up to the door, and Sir Bevis got out, accompanied by Colonel Rudkin. They were both handsome men, but Sir Bevis was the taller by a good deal. The Colonel was a rather short, thick-set man, with piercing black eyes and bushy eyebrows—a good-looking, stern man of fifty-two. The Baronet had more grace in his bearing, and decidedly a more classical face, but the complexion was rather sallow. His hair was coming off, and what remained was silvered, as also his whiskers.

There was a difference in age of five years between the brothers. Sir Bevis Rudkin was a learned man—a man of genius; he was always inventing some new thing; he knew pretty nearly everything, and was apt to smile at his brother Denis's incapability and impetuosity. When it was a question of head-work Denis used to make the best of his way

to Bevis, who always good-naturedly helped him out of his difficulties, and showed him how to avoid them in future. But it was all to no purpose.

Denis, unlucky man, never seemed in his element except when fighting with someone up to his eyes in law. He wasted more money on lawyers than anyone would credit, and invariably the bone of contention, let it be what it would, when it came to be examined, was found to be rotten. The one characteristic of Denis Roger Rudkin was a want of prudence and forethought. He would take in hand a trust, and, being strictly honourable, when the accounts were cast up, whatever was deficient from gross neglect he made good out of his own pocket. And all for want of management. He had no rule or method, and, had the estate fallen into his hands, it would have been mortgaged. His appointment had pleased him, whether it had paid was yet to be proved.

He looked with astonishment and delight at his children, especially pretty Adeline, who was now ready to come out and take the control of her father's house. Renie he eyed somewhat curiously; she, too, had altered from what he last saw her. She had shot up, and promised to be taller than Adeline, who was very *petite*. Her hair was now dressed, or, more properly, "put up" in a knot at the back of her head, which was not becoming to her, but it suited her about as well as any other fashion would have done.

Renie was hopelessly plain, and Colonel Rudkin speedily perceived it. It was to Adeline all the fond words were uttered, to Adeline all the kisses were given. When any presents came Adeline had the choice, and what she left was bestowed on Renie, who, as a matter of course, after that, cared no great deal about them. Colonel Rudkin would call her to him sometimes, and ask her—

"Do you love papa?"

"Yes, I love you."

"Kiss me, then, and run away, Renie."

This was about all they ever said to one another for many months.

It seems, perhaps, improbable to you, reader, nevertheless it is strictly true. Colonel Rudkin was a strange man, and his child was just as strange. She saw when she was wanted and when she was not, and if it was her father's pleasure to pet and notice Adeline, on the grounds of her delicacy and six years' seniority, it was a matter of indifference to Renie, and she got to do without the noticing.

But a change took place about sixteen months after the Colonel's return. Adeline was visiting pretty much, and greatly admired. At one grand party she met a gentleman named Norman Howard, an architect, a nice, happy, good-natured, kind-hearted fellow, very good looking. He had property left him by his parents of vast extent, so that

his business was not his sole support, and he resided in a snug, pretty place, called Beach Cliff, two miles on the other side of Zeigleheath. They fell in love with each other, and as Colonel Rudkin liked Norman Howard, and desired to find his precious little daughter a good husband and kind protector, he agreed to their being engaged.

Thus it was that Adeline having another to devote herself to, Renie came more into notice. Her father now talked to her, and sometimes very seriously indeed; and Renie perfectly understood, and gave her opinion, which, though necessarily childish, or rather girlish, was freighted with sound common sense. These talks were alike refreshing to both father and daughter, and there is no telling how near they might have got to each other, how necessary to each other's happiness they might have become, had God so willed it. For plain Renie loved her father dearly, though he had kept her off, and she

would have tried her best to be a true, faithful daughter to him. But it was not to be: the two lines parted at this point, and the child must turn off alone.

Colonel Rudkin was not ill many days, and one morning he got so much worse that Adeline and Renie were sent for to his room; Norman Howard was there too. The invalid was gasping for breath, and could not speak, but he thought of his little pet lamb at the last, and put her hand in Norman Howard's. He took no notice of Renie, poor girl! and shortly after he died.

So ended Renie's acquaintance with her father; it was brought to an abrupt close that day in September, never to be renewed till the time when they meet in heaven. It was a mist at first to Renie; she could not realise that she must go groping about all her life, and never find him to have another talk with—that he was dead past recall, and almost a stranger to her, his own child. She wandered

up and down the long kitchen garden, keeping out of the way of everyone; and so the time wore on, and the funeral got over, and everything was so awfully still and solemn, it sent a chill, a loneliness to the girl's heart.

But things could not go on as they had done, that was quite clear; so Adeline, Renie, and Miss Webb all went to Zeigleheath to live with Sir Bevis, and Dove Park—sweet place! —was shut up. Renie was now thirteen, and Adeline going to be married; so after a little while Miss Webb left, with a nice sum settled on her, and Renie went to school in England. Sir Bevis had a strange dislike to continental schools, and Renie was rather a pet of the eccentric old gentleman's, so he would not send her abroad. This did not at all trouble Renie at the time; she was too young to understand fully the advantages derived by a sojourn on the Continent.

A suitable school was found; not one of extravagant terms, the reason for which you

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shall hear presently, but a plain, homely establishment, where there was good food given, and good plain tuition. It was kept by a couple of old maids, assisted by an English and a French governess. Masters (but not the first) attended so many days a week, and some taught one thing and some another. It was the sort of school where a little is made to go a long way; it was the ghost of grandeur which predominated there, not the reality. Hill Cottage was situated on the outskirts of a pretty village, about one hour's ride in the train from Waterloo Bridge.

The sweet village of Ripley afforded every possible advantage for growing girls: good pure air and seductive walks, so that they never really performed a duty walk, or made a labour of it.

The Misses Bird were precise, gentle women, ladies of reduced means, and they performed their daily work in a meek, resigned manner, and were rarely, if ever, seen

out of temper. Their motto was—"It is not what you do, but how you do it."

Hill Cottage sheltered some characters, and not a mean supply of ability. There were about twenty pupils, and only one out of the twenty had a father living. Most of them were orphans, with a miserable pittance a-year and a cavalcade of grand relations, who condescendingly sent them a box of old clothes once a-year. What an assortment those boxes used to contain! Yards of lace, yards of ribbon and velvet, the skirt of this, the bodice of the other, primrose gloves and satin slippers—evidently the things the various maids did not care for. But they came in useful at Hill Cottage, and on breaking-up night, or when the dancing-master came in the evening, as was sometimes the case, the toilets were by no means to be despised or in bad taste.

Hill Cottage was a little world of itself, and under its slanting, irregular roof, the die of many a life was cast.

CHAPTER IV.

About a year after her father's death, Adeline married Norman Howard, and Renie went home for the wedding. Unfortunate girl! she seemed destined to cut a sorry figure in the eyes of the world! The dresses, bonnets, &c., had all been arranged to suit those on the spot, and never a thought had been bestowed on plain-faced Renie. Adeline was, as a matter of course, almost overcome by her own importance; so, when the eventful morning arrived, and Renie, fresh from school, began to array herself in the wedding garments, she was a fit object for a museum.

The dresses were composed of the brightest yellow silk, the bonnets of white, with flowers and crystal ornaments, and affixed to the back was an immense tulle veil, all bespatterd with huge paste beads. The materials were of the best—the style and shape villanous. They had been executed by a prim milliner, who never stitched or pinned anything—everything was tied—and she had spoken of the forthcoming bonnets as "elegant arrangements of foliage and blonde." And she kept her word—they *were* elegant arrangements. To improve matters, Renie's bonnet was too large for her; the other bridesmaids looked very well, being pretty girls with a fair share of colour. But Renie, with her sallow complexion and yellow dress, looked for all the world like a Seville orange, or a person afflicted with jaundice. But the ceremony passed, like everything else, and Renie returned to school, one conviction firm in her mind—that it should be the last wedding in the family.

There was every probability that it *would* be the last, for more reasons than one.

Now that Adeline was married and comfortably settled for the remainder of her stay in this world, Sir Bevis thought it incumbent upon him to inform his youngest niece of her position. Colonel Rudkin's affairs had been investigated, and it was discovered that the sole fortune left to his two daughters was the sum of seventy-five pounds a year each, which, with duty off, left about seventy pounds. There was not another penny, and that was their *fortune!* What Colonel Rudkin had done with his money no one could tell, and no one had a right to ask. The reality was sufficient, and no speculation could alter it; if he enjoyed it during his life so much the better. We shall see how his children did on the leavings.

Renie realized her position, as her uncle intended she should, and thought it over carefully. There was but one hope—that Sir

Bevis, being unmarried, might leave her something at his death. Zeigleheath would, of course, go to the next male heir—that heir would have been her father, had he lived. Now that he was dead, the succession reverted to a remote branch, in fact, no Rudkin at all, but the nearest male relative living: Leopold Gunston, a wanderer. But this hope was destined to be wrenched from her.

It is a year and a half since Adeline's marriage, and luncheon time at Hill Cottage. The girls are alone in the schoolroom, with the tray of bread and butter, but it is not disappearing as fast as one could desire. The truth is, they are digesting something rather more tough than bread and butter. The twelve post brought rather startling news, the importance of which those girls, varying in age from fifteen to nineteen, each with her way to make when she left Hill Cottage, was perfectly awake to. They were nice-looking girls, all of them, and

all friends; there was none of that hateful backbiting and "sha'n't speak to you for a fortnight," which is so prevalent in girls' schools. The trouble which had fallen upon one of their companions was felt by them all, and it was not ill-nature that prompted them to speak as we shall presently see.

"Here comes Mademoiselle!" exclaimed a short, fair girl, with a slight squint, "and I'll wager anything she tells us she is going to 'wind up the clock.'"

"Hush, Kate!" said one, while a titter passed round the group.

There was a patter, patter coming down the carpetless stairs, accompanied by a voice calling—

"Miss Or-ton! Miss Or-ton; wherre arre you? I have got something to say to you!" and the door burst open, and in dived Mademoiselle, attired in a short dress, a scarlet jacket, and very high-heeled shoes, her black hair coiled into thick plaits at the back of her head.

"Beg your pardon, young ladies, but where is Miss Orton?"

"She is with Renie, I think, Mademoiselle. Will you not have some luncheon?" and the girl handed the plate.

"*Merci*, Mary; and what is the matter with that Renie?"

Before Mary could reply, a tall, thin girl, who was inelegantly perched on the corner of a desk, kicking her legs to and fro to the tune of eating thick bread and butter, made answer—

"It is this, Mademoiselle—the old gentleman has taken unto himself a spouse."

"A what?" cried the bewildered Mademoiselle, "a what, Lucy? Do you mean a complaint?"

"A complaint!" echoed Lucy, "perhaps it is; only we call it a wife."

"Lucy, why don't you answer to me? and stop to kick your legs; it is very ugly, that fashion. What has happened to Renie?"

"I have answered you, Mademoiselle, and told you about it."

"But I do not understand."

"Oh! that's a different thing; Mary, you tell."

"Well, Mademoiselle, this is what Lucy means—Sir Bevis Rudkin has got married, and, of course, it will make a great difference to poor Renie."

"But, why? I don't see; she will only have one relation the more."

"Ugh!" grunted Lucy; "she'll have more relations than she wants shortly. Can't you see, Mademoiselle, that now her uncle has got married (old donkey!) most likely there'll be a child, and, if so, he'll never remember Renie in his will."

"Oh! that is a bad job for Renie. *Ah, ça! les enfants! c'est sûr*, leave the English alone for that. When did the marriage take place?"

"On the 23rd," replied Mary.

It was indeed too true; Sir Bevis Rudkin had got married at last to a young creature, only twenty, the daughter of a poor Methodist minister. The baronet met her at Brighton, in one of the hotels where she was staying with a rich widow lady, to whom she acted as companion. He had made up his mind suddenly, and written to Mrs. Troost, the housekeeper, to put everything in order at Zeigleheath. It was a tremendous shock to everyone, and no one had dared to write to poor Renie until they had been home a week. Then Sir Bevis asked Mrs. Howard if Renie knew, as she had not written to her aunt, and Adeline was obliged to confess that she did not.

"Then write by this afternoon's post, Addy; I cannot, for I promised Lady Rudkin that I would drive her to Hantley. Give my dear love to Renie, and say I will write in the course of a day or two."

The way Adeline accomplished her mission was to commence with a passionate outburst

which, as it gradually became more comprehensible, imparted the following intelligence. The young lady who had been successful in catching the old baronet was named Esther Whittingham, and nothing further than that was known of her. Adeline did not even say whether she was pretty; and Renie never asked, nor did she write to her new aunt. She wrote to her uncle a decided, but respectful letter, which showed him her feelings plainly. He read it three times, and, sighing, put it in his pocket. Lady Rudkin, with all the assurance of a young wife, said—

"Show me that letter, Bevis; I never saw such queer writing. I hope the writer will never come here, for I am certain I should be frightened of him."

Sir Bevis only smiled and said, half sadly—

"Should you? Well, you need not terrify yourself, Esther, I don't think there is much fear of the individual coming at present," but he did not show her the letter.

No, there was no fear of Renie coming at present, or for a pretty long time, and so she told her uncle.

The summer holidays were approaching, and she readily accepted Lucy Northwood's invitation to spend them with her. Lucy's papa was dead, and her mother left with a small income and a large family to bring up and educate, of which Lucy was one of the elders.

Addy sent Renie her summer clothes, and off with Lucy she went. Mrs. Northwood had taken a cottage at Margate, and there they spent the long hot weeks. Renie was speedily a favourite, for she was a good-hearted, sensible girl, ready to turn her hand to anything, from bathing the children in the morning to helping Mrs. Northwood and Carry and Lucy to repair their torn garments at night.

She saw plainly that her future life must be one of work. The £70 a-year left her by her

father was nothing—she could live upon it, but how? She had no relation to go to but her uncle and Addy, and that she would never do. Addy was all very well for a week or two, but Renie knew they could never get on peaceably much longer. Then, again, Norman Howard was as good a fellow as ever lived, and fond of, and kind to Renie, but she would not go and quarter herself in his house; it did not suit her pride.

So she was left homeless with £70 a-year.

"Ah! but," you say, "she has enough to live on." Supposing we take the trouble to look into that matter? She must live respectably, to commence with. And a respectable family—say a widow's or a clergyman's, would not take any girl to reside in their comfortable house much under £50 a-year. That leaves her just £20 for clothes, expenses, and doctor's bills, should she be ill.

Have you ever tried to dress on £20, and look always neat and fresh, and do a fair

amount of visiting, even in a quiet way? If so, you will probably recollect how much you had over at the end of the year.

And that was Renie Rudkin's position, unless she worked, which she fully intended doing. And now comes another piece of injustice. She wrote to her uncle, asking him to allow her to go either to Germany or to France to learn the language; she could not learn it properly in England. No, he would not allow her to go, thereby taking, at the least, £20 out of her pocket each year.

She must work, and at that never failing resort—teaching. Now Renie was capable of imparting English, music, singing, and drawing to children, but she could not include French and feel able to do justice, so she resolved to leave it out, and she would procure a situation as nursery-governess at £15, or £20 at the very most, after years of experience. Such was her prospect, and she was, indeed, right when she said her chances

of getting a living hung by a thread. It did truly, and, at the best, waiting is but weary work, even if you hope to benefit in the end.

School commenced again, and Renie worked doubly hard; she was a very clever girl, and the Misses Bird were not a little proud of their pupil. But the French was hopeless, while everything else was a success. She played and sang well, but drawing was her forte, and her master might well regret parting with her.

One afternoon in June, about a year after the baronet's marriage, the long, low schoolroom presented a comfortable, cheerful appearance. It was "drawing-day," that is, the afternoon devoted to steady, earnest practice. The French window that overlooked the garden was wide open, and the birds sang fearlessly, almost at the very steps. Silence reigned, excepting now and then, the most frequent remark being—"How hot it is!" The little clock on the mantel-piece struck

four, and several looked up. But they did not cease study till five, and the heads dropped again.

"Pilgrim fathers! I have put this cow's leg wrong; Renie, help me."

"Lend me your pencil then, Lucy; there, now it's right."

Mademoiselle came round and looked over the girls' shoulders.

"That is good, my dear Renie; you have the taste."

"Of course she has, Mademoiselle," said quick Lucy; "Renie is going to cut a figure before long. Don't believe it unless you choose, Mademoiselle; but I generally speak the truth. Take for example the little piccaninny; did I not say truly?"

"Yes," said Mademoiselle, nodding her head. "Renie, what have they called that *misérable enfant?*"

"Addy tells me he is christened 'Rodney Bevis.' She pronounces him a lovely boy,

and she is not particularly fond of children, so he must be nice."

"Your sister, she has no children?"

"Oh! no, Mademoiselle, all they have is little 'Minnie,' and they think such a deal of it."

"Are you going home these holidays, Renie?"

"I have no home, Mademoiselle, so I stay here. I shall not go to Zeigleheath till I leave at Christmas. Uncle says I must go then, but I don't think I shall remain long."

No one made any remark, and shortly after Renie left the room by the window, which at Hill Cottage was more used than the door in summer time.

Then the Frenchwoman let her tongue run a bit, and to not a little purpose.

"I am sorry for that poor Renie; it is a great blow to her. But it is the way with you English: half the children are brought up with the false ideas. Take Renie, *par ex-*

emple, look at her. Led to believe she is to make the heritage of Zeig—bah! I cannot say that awful word—never mind, I will go without—with her uncle. *Bon!* just when she is leaving school—paf!—he gets married to a young thing, and before you can turn yourself round, there is a baby, who will eat up the money and everything, and Renie must work. *Heureusement elle en est capable*, *mais* what of that? Oh! la, la! you English! you are an ink bottle; I cannot understand you!"

Most of the girls were laughing, and Miss Orton also.

"Yes, Mademoiselle, I agree with you," said Lucy Northwood; "it is a shabby trick. It is not that Renie cares about so much money, but Sir Bevis won't allow her to go abroad, and says, 'You will never require it.' As poor Renie says, it does not look as if she wouldn't. And then there is Lady Rudkin. Renie does not like the idea of being in the

house on sufferance; some young aunts are very perky, and Renie won't stand that from anyone; and quite right of her too. What do you say, Miss Orton?"

"That Renie is perfectly right, Lucy; I strongly recommend her to help herself, and not trust to chance. Her uncle may remember her in his will, and he may not, and I deem her wise to provide against the contingency if possible, and not allow the time that intervenes to slip away without making an effort. She need not offend her uncle or aunt; at the same time it is everyone's privilege to find for themselves, and if Sir Bevis is a sensible man, he will think the better of her for it, and appreciate her independence. Lucy, my love, take your elbow off the table."

Miss Lucy did as requested, and proceeded to put a tail to the cow, in the midst of which occupation Renie re-entered the room, and so stopped all further comments on her affairs.

She was very like the Renie of old, only

that she was considerably taller and thinner, and had not very long been promoted to long dresses and bonnets. She held herself well, and, though not at all graceful, she was certainly a lady, and a well-educated one. She looked quite twenty-one, though not seventeen till the 9th of November. It was her last half at school, and on the 21st of December she was due at Zeigleheath.

CHAPTER V.

Renie is expected, and with no little delight by one member of that household, and that one is Dame Troost, the active, though aged housekeeper. She has seen the two rooms set apart for Renie snugly warmed and arranged. They are not in the pleasantest part of the house—my lady objected to the spare rooms there being disarranged—so they are at the extreme end, looking towards the water-mill, and over the wide sea. To Mrs. Troost's thinking, they were dismal, cheerless rooms, and the good-hearted soul tried her best to throw comfort into them.

"But it is no use," said she at last, "these rooms always give me the creeps; I wonder what my lady would have said if they had been fixed on for Master Rodney's nurseries. It is a shame to put Miss Renie into them, poor dear! but there's one blessing, she's not timid, like Miss Addy. I know nothing on earth would have got *her* into them. But she had the best of everything, she had, the master grudged her nothing. Ah! them was different days to these! Anyway, I am not going to ask my lady another thing; I shall speak to Sir Bevis himself about a maid for Miss Renie. There's my niece, Christie Parnell, just the very girl to suit my young lady—neat fingers and little to say. I shall just set Frost on the watch for an opportunity for me to say a word to him without *her* at his elbow."

Mrs. Troost was in earnest, and, catching Frost later in the day, she said—

"Frost, just you tell me pretty much of

Sir Bevis's movements in the morning, when my lady is with him, and when she is not; I want a word with him."

"Very good, Mrs. Troost," continued portly Frost, straightening himself up like a pouter-pigeon, and doing his best to look at his shining boots, which, by reason of a protrusion higher up, he was unable to do. "Mrs. Troost, I don't fancy those two will hit it."

"Those two! I suppose you mean my lady and Miss Renie? I don't *fancy* anything about it, Frost, I feel convinced. On one thing I could stake my life, and that is that Miss Renie won't take none of her ladyship's airs. If she has the sense to keep them to herself, or show them to other people, they may manage to live in the same house. But I know Miss Renie's disposition; for that matter, I don't believe Miss Addy could get along with her if they lived together."

"No, I don't believe she could either, Mrs.

Troost. But Mrs. Howard is not like Miss Renie, and never will be; might as well try to move a rock as Miss Renie when her mind's set: I'd a deal sooner undertake to move Sir Bevis. Miss Renie is the living image of the old mistress, Lady Dorothy."

"Yes, you are right, Frost, she is; like her father in face, but old Lady Dorothy in figure and manner. She takes after our present master in many things too. Ah, well, I must go and see after the laundry maids; don't forget, Frost."

"No, *you* may rely upon me, Mrs. Troost."

Frost proved equal to the occasion. The next morning, about half-past ten, he came to the housekeeper's room.

"Mrs. Troost, now's your time or never. My lady has gone to the nursery and Sir Bevis is alone, reading the morning paper. But don't waste any time, because she'll be back directly, child and all."

Mrs. Troost put aside her work, worthy

soul, and set off at a quick trot down the passage and into the wide hall. She found the door of the library ajar, and giving a sharp tap, awaited the command to "come in," which was given without any hesitation.

Sir Bevis was sitting at the table, rather close to the fire. He seemed to feel the cold this winter for the first time within the memories of the old retainers, and they noticed it. But he was an old man, and his blood was chilled. However hard a man may be, he cannot prevent age from creeping over him.

"Well, Mrs. Troost, how are you this sharp morning? Is there anything I can do for you, or is it Lady Rudkin you are seeking?"

"No, Sir Bevis," replied the old dame, curtseying, "it is you I want, not my lady. I have come to speak about Miss Renie (dear lamb), who comes back on Thursday. I have got her rooms ready, and made them as comfortable as I can; but they are dismal rooms at the best, Sir Bevis."

"And which may they be, Mrs. Troost?"

"Why, those in the west wing, sir."

"The west wing! How is it you have put Miss Renie there, Troost?"

"Because my lady ordered it, Sir Bevis. She would not allow any of the rooms to be taken—no, not one; so there was nothing for it but those, or taking Miss Renie away to the back of the house, and I could not do *that*, sir."

Sir Bevis winced.

"No, Mrs. Troost, certainly not. You see, the child coming has upset things; Lady Rudkin will have the best for him, and it is the way with young mothers; we must excuse them."

He looked at the housekeeper to see what she thought, but she evidently did not think with him; her head was held stiffly, and not so much as a bow of ribbon moved; if her mind was as stiff as her head there was no hope for Lady Rudkin.

Sir Bevis coughed.

"What I came to speak to you about, sir, was a maid for our young lady. She must have one, that is clear; and I doubted not but you would wish me to appoint one?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Troost; Miss Renie must have everything, remember."

"To be sure, Sir Bevis, to be sure. And I will make so bold as to name my young niece, Christie Parnell, for the place."

"Very good, Mrs. Troost; you had better settle it at once."

"That I will, sir; and I wish you a very good morning, Sir Bevis."

"Good morning, Mrs. Troost."

The good creature bustled off, her face all aglow; she had carried the day, and if Lady Rudkin had been appealed to it would have been put a stop to at once, on the grounds that there were already plenty of maids in the house. Things were changed at Zeigleheath since the marriage of Sir Bevis, and

none knew it better than the housekeeper, Jessie Troost. But she was not going to see the child of the place put on one side or slighted by any young wife, if *she* could help it. Renie was a sort of heirloom, something that had been sent specially, in the eyes of the Moordart people. And then the child's oddity had made her noticed. There was something very tender and touching in the baby, so small and brown, that was ushered into the world with tears and lamentations, aye, and with curses—the baby that had been cradled in strangers' arms and fed with a bottle, whose little face had never borne the impress of a mother's kiss. She had come, and had not been welcomed, her childhood had been lonely and forlorn; no one had watched her first attempt to walk, no one had listened with delight to the first lispings of her baby tongue. She seemed to have had no babyhood; she had been brought up hardly, because she had none of that affection that makes a child's life sweet.

And now she was returning to what ought to have been her home, to be treated by her new aunt, most probably, as an intruder. Never mind! Mrs. Troost did her best, and engaged her neat, pretty niece, Christie Parnell, as her maid, with a long lecture on duty and faithfulness to her mistress.

CHAPTER VI.

It was a sad parting at Hill Cottage that Thursday morning. But the Misses Bird made Renie promise them to return if she was not happy, and to come and see them as often as she could. Lucy Northwood, who was also leaving, made half the journey with Renie, and of course lightened the way considerably. Renie was not destitute of friends; plenty of her schoolfellows' homes were open to her, as well as the Misses Bird's.

It was after four when the train stopped at Moordart, and, of course, almost dark. The

wind was very cutting as it whirled sharply round the land from the sea. A carriage was waiting for Renie, with Frost to see after her luggage; but she herself was quite equal to coping with railway porters, however stupid.

"I have four boxes, Frost, and a roll of wraps."

"Then all right, Miss Renie. Laws, miss! how you've changed."

"Have I?" replied Renie, smiling. "I am getting old, Frost, and it is time I thought for myself; I am turned seventeen."

"That's not much, Miss Renie, but you looks eight-and-twenty," and he sighed.

The three miles' drive was at last over, and all too soon for Renie, who had plenty to occupy her mind. As the well-known landmarks were passed, she remembered how different she had felt when last she passed them, not troubled with too many cares for the future, regarding Zeigleheath as a safe and sure home. Now things were altered, herself

among them. She felt that she was about to try an experiment, and, if it failed, she must make her home amongst strangers. Something very like tears glistened in the fine eyes of this poor orphan girl as she thought of the long years before her, the dreary waste she had to cross. Do not imagine her a coward, or faint-hearted; she was not, but every girl with power to think must be aware of the difficulties and trials that await her who has a path to cut for herself.

Renie Rudkin was no fool; she had not lived seventeen years for nothing; she knew how old men like Sir Bevis marrying late were led by their wives, and she did not expect her uncle to prove an exception. She only hoped that Lady Rudkin would be a well-disposed woman and not jealous of her; what her appearance was she had no idea, for Addy, not explicit at any time, seemed to be paralysed when she wrote of Zeigleheath.

Perhaps the truth was, that Renie was too

much annoyed to take the necessary trouble to draw her out and lead her to impart news, so she felt now, on her way to the place, like a person awaking out of a dream; but she had made a resolve, and that was, to try her best to remain at Zeigleheath, at any rate for a year or two. It was Miss Orton's advice: "Keep peace, Renie, my dear, and stay as long as you possibly can; you are very young to take a situation, and it is weary work, child!"

It was good advice, and Renie recognised it as such. She was not prejudiced against Lady Rudkin; she was going prepared for anything, and to judge for herself of the woman her uncle had set over her.

The carriage drove through the gates, and soon stopped at the massive door; the place looked fit to stand a siege—it was put together for use, not ornament.

In the hall Sir Bevis met her.

"Renie, my child, said he, taking her pale

face between his hands and kissing it, "I am glad, very glad to see you, and so much changed too!"

"Yes! every one says I am changed, uncle; you are looking pretty well."

"Pretty well only?"

"Well, I don't think it is *very*."

"Then it must be pretty; you have a quick eye, child; use it mercifully, Renie. I am not quite up to the mark, I am cold; these snowy winds cut me so."

He still held her hands and gazed at her. He was thinking how like she was to her father and his mother; it might have been Lady Dorothy herself who came up to the hall—the same stately walk and commanding carriage, the same figure. She was plainly and inexpensively dressed in a dark cloth dress and jacket, and a dark bonnet and veil. There was something lonely about the sombre garments that tallied only too well with the dark earnest face in the bonnet, a face that seemed to say, "I can stand alone."

Sir Bevis was startled—was *this* the child? Denis's little brown-faced baby? He looked in vain for some sign of girlhood—a ribbon, a tip of colour peeping out, but it was not to be seen. Everything was befitting a woman, and not a weak one either. A thought flitted across the baronet's brain, something about money and clothes.

"Renie, my dear, you are dressed like a nun or a widow, how is it? You are Miss Rudkin, and only seventeen. I suppose your wardrobe is poorly stocked, just coming from school?"

Renie glanced at her things, and an odd look came into the eyes she turned up to her uncle.

"I put on these dark things because I came alone and second class; I don't like light ones, they don't suit my grave face. These are not very shabby. But I have plenty of suitable dresses, uncle; Addy sent me a lot of hers, and I have had them made to fit me, and revised, so I shall do nicely till my money is due."

"Renie, what made you come second class?"

Again the queer look.

"Because I did not care to spend more than I could help; indeed, I had not it. Mr. Steel came and settled Miss Bird's account, and there was only sufficient left to bring me here, and leave a little in my pocket, so I did not see the policy of giving it to the railway company."

Sir Bevis fidgetted.

"I have been careless, Renie, my dear, but come into my study in the morning, and I will give you £20."

The dark face flushed.

"No, thank you, uncle, I can manage till the middle of February; I prefer it."

He smiled.

"The Rudkin pride, Renie. Never mind, I like it. And now you are warmer I want you to see your aunt."

He turned, but, at that instant, a door just

behind them opened, and Lady Rudkin appeared.

Sir Bevis had followed his fate, like his predecessors, and married a fair woman. Renie examined her critically.

Yes, she was pretty, or, more correctly, beautiful. She was of medium height, and well formed. Her skin was perfectly white, and her throat long and full, like a marble pillar. The face was well-shaped, but plump, two dimples danced in the round cheeks, the nose was small and pretty, while the mouth was pursed up like a child's. Her hair was much lighter than Adeline's—in fact it was golden; how it was dressed at the back Renie could not see, but it was taken off the face somehow, and two long curls, evidently natural, dropped over her shoulders. Her appearance was decidedly striking; she was what the world calls a beautiful woman. But she had a fault, and it lay in the upper part of the face; the eyes were large blue ones, widely opened in a

very innocent, childish manner. It was the forehead that did not take Renie's fancy; there was something deficient there, according to her taste.

"Esther, my love, here is Renie waiting to make your acquaintance."

She advanced with a bewitching smile and outstretched hand.

"You have long been expected, Miss Rudkin, particularly by Mrs. Troost; is she a great friend of yours?"

Renie's eyes were doing their duty.

"Yes, Lady Rudkin, she is. Mrs. Troost was very kind to me when a child, and I never forget either kindness or unkindness."

Lady Rudkin laughed merrily, but retreated a few steps, nevertheless. When Renie had left the hall she turned to her husband, and said—

"Your niece makes me nervous, Bevis; her eyes are wonderful."

"Yes, Renie's eyes are not to be trifled with, any more than their owner. She will

not, of course, reverence you much, Esther; you are far younger in mind than she is, so it cannot be expected. There are five years between you; you are twenty-two, eh?"

"Yes. Bevis, will she stay long?"

The old man turned sharply.

"Yes, I expect and hope so, Esther; recollect this is her home by right. Had her father lived, he would have succeeded me, and she would have been Miss Rudkin, of Zeigleheath. But why do you ask?"

"For no particular reason; I was only thinking how she could be made useful."

"Esther! what are you talking about? Renie is not here to be made *useful*, she will please herself in everything."

Lady Rudkin laughed again, and put her pretty face up.

"I did not mean anything, you silly old darling! it was stupid of me to say it. But then I am not at all clever, and cannot help saying absurd things; can I?"

"No," replied Sir Bevis, fondly kissing the soft upturned face, "I don't expect you to keep that silly head in order, there's not much sense in it."

"Then why did you marry me, if I am such a child?"

"Why do we do many things, Esther? The oldest men sometimes lose their heads, my dear. But we won't argue the point, it would not be wise; go and get dressed, it is nearly twenty minutes to six."

Renie had barely entered her room before she was clasped in the stout arms of motherly Mrs. Troost.

"Welcome home, my dear young lady, it makes me feel younger to see you again. And you must be tired with all that shaking in the train. Christie, run away and bring Miss Renie a cup of good hot tea. It will keep you up till dinner."

"I don't want any keeping up, Mrs. Troost; but I will not refuse a cup of good tea; I used

to be so fond of it when a child, do you remember?"

"I should just think I did. I never look back if I can help it, Miss Renie, since things has got turned wrong side up. I never expected to live to see what I have, more's the pity. I suspect we are only at the beginning of a very bad business, but I'll say no more, since you're here."

"I presume you allude to my uncle's marriage, Mrs. Troost?"

The good soul made no answer, only rolled her eyes.

"It must have astonished you all very much?"

"Astonished! astonished, don't express it, Miss Renie. When the news came we might have all been took with the paralytics; we could not believe it at first, and afterwards, when we saw it in the *Times*, I had spasms awful for three days. I told them all that another such shock would finish me, and

indeed it would so, Miss Renie. Miss Addy, too, poor dear! Mrs. Howard, that is, how she cried. You see, Miss Renie, it has upset everything so, it is not so much the new lady, but there's that child, and there's no telling how many more 'll come. So you see, my dear, I expect there will be nothing for any one after the mother and child is served. And Sir Bevis has given my lady such a power of jewellery, spent a fortune on her, in fact."

"Indeed! had she none of her own?"

"Bless you, no; she hadn't hardly a decent rag to her back when he found her, let alone ornaments. Is your tea nice, miss?"

"Very, Mrs. Troost," replied the girl, drinking it; and then looking up at the old woman, she said—

"I think I know what you mean by 'nothing for any one,' and I may as well tell you I don't expect it. I am here to stay, if possible, because I can improve the time, and look about me. But if it becomes insupport-

able, I shall leave, and take a situation as governess."

"Miss Renie, won't you go to Mrs. Howard? she has no children."

"No, Mrs. Troost, I will never live with a brother-in-law on sufferance. I don't want to cross uncle; I respect and love him, and I don't want his money, but if he had remained single, I could have made my home here and been a daughter to him. But that is all past and gone, and it is no use talking about it. What time is dinner now, Mrs. Troost?"

"Half-past six, Miss Renie, sharp. The master is as particular as ever about that, so I will leave you, and send Christie. She is my niece, Miss Renie; you remember little Christie Parnell? she is about three months younger than you, and she is your maid. I trust she'll prove attentive and neat handed, she has the name of it. Her father did want her to be a dress-maker and milliner, and commence business in the village, so he sent

her to London, and actually paid ten pounds to get her into some fine shop, where they, finding her taste superior, worked her nearly to death. The girl was willing, but after twelve months of it, her health gave way, and she was obliged to come home. They wrote for her to go back, but I would not allow it, seeing as I never did approve of it, so I engaged her by Sir Bevis's orders as your maid, and I hope she may be faithful to you; she is very fond of you, Miss Renie."

"Is she? Well, we shall get along nicely, depend upon it, Mrs. Troost; and I shall be glad of her dressmaking and millinery capabilities, for I must be very careful."

Renie was dressed and downstairs in good time. Lady Rudkin appeared a girl beside the staid, sober-looking woman who so rarely smiled. But it was a beautiful smile, and gave quite a different aspect to her face. Sir Bevis eyed her narrowly, but he could find no fault; so he smiled complacently, and warmed his back at the fire.

The dinner passed off amicably, and Lady Rudkin talked and laughed a great deal. Renie very soon got tired of this, and hoped it was not a regular thing. But it was, and what is more, reckoned by a great many people a special charm.

I am sorry I cannot agree with them. There is nothing annoys me more, or sooner rouses my temper, than incessant laughter. There is something idiotic in that everlasting giggle some ladies are afflicted with, or addicted to, I don't know which to call it. They laugh at everyone, at everything, and at nothing; I would just as soon have a laughing hyena in my company—it *is their* speciality, but it is certainly not a woman's, or ought not to be.

There was a red spot on each of Renie's cheeks as she accompanied Lady Rudkin to the drawing-room.

It was a grand old room that, substantially furnished, which is a thing not often seen now-a-days. The thing at present seems to

be who can produce the lightest chair on the thinnest legs. A drawing-room is a place to be avoided when strewn with fancy things that crack while you look at them, and forcibly remind you of an ornament shop. But, thank heaven, that petty and detestable fashion was not in vogue when Zeigleheath was last open to improvements.

It was an immense room, and not overfilled with furniture. There were large couches, with three or four cushions on each in every recess, and tables with books and views on them to amuse people. The grates were large, and held roaring fires.

Renie looked round; she remembered playing hide-and-seek with Sir Bevis during Miss Webb's time, and curling his white hair before one of these fires. There was no Lady Rudkin then to settle herself comfortably by the cheery blaze, and compose herself to sleep. It was a pity she could not sleep for ever; she looked so pretty and innocent.

No one would ever have taken that dimpled face to belong to a woman of twenty-two, and a mother. She slept like a child, with her rosy lips parted, and her long golden curls clinging round the firm white throat. Her hair was dressed in no particular style; it was in profusion, and put up artistically, with loose locks here and there. At one side was posed a jewelled butterfly. Well might Mrs. Troost say Sir Bevis "had spent a power of money on her." There was no small display that night.

Renie watched, and wondered about her past life—had she had a happy home? a tender, loving mother and father? kind brothers and sisters? Yes, surely; or she could never have kept that smooth, childish face. But Renie was wrong: there are some natures that cannot feel the world's smarts, by reason of their shallowness. Their life is a "Come-day-go-day-God-send-Sunday" sort of existence, and they never cease being

children from the day they come into the world, to the day they go out. It is, without doubt, a peaceful, tranquil sort of mind, but one does not envy them it. It is like the silence of a dumb child, compulsory, and if there is any feeling for it uppermost in our hearts, it ought to be pity. There is nothing very interesting in watching anyone sleep, however pretty they may appear. So Renie resolved to go and look about her till tea came in, when, no doubt, Lady Rudkin would rouse up. She had not considered it necessary to keep awake for Renie's benefit—it is wonderful the way some women draw the line between themselves and their supposed inferiors.

Renie went upstairs. Her object was to see the child, the little heir. But the house had been changed; the rooms were different, and Renie was some time finding the exact locality of the precious bit of flesh and blood. My lady had a will of her own, if nothing

else; she would not have anything disturbed, except for herself and child. The nurseries were not far from her own room, and the best of everything was in them. Renie tapped and entered. The night nursery was not occupied, late as it was, but before the fire, in the adjoining room, sat the nurse with a little cherub of a baby boy on her lap—such a lovely little creature! he dazzled poor Renie's eyes. The nurse was our old friend, Mary, who was under-nurse in the days of Renie's babyhood. Old nurse had gone home many years before, and Mary had married Jem Muggins, the carpenter. But, after a few years of wedded life, he had met with an accident, poor fellow! that caused his death. He chopped his thumb while cutting a board one morning, and lock-jaw set in, and he died. It was a hard blow to poor Mary, but she still had something left—his two children. Perhaps she, in the desolation of her heart, set too much store by them, and forgot her

God. So a fever wind blew to Moordart, and wafted away their young lives, and Mary was, indeed, desolate. When little Rodney was expected, Sir Bevis asked her if she would like to come back to the family, and she gladly accepted the offer.

"How do you do, Mary?" said Renie, holding out her hand.

"Why, Miss Renie! God bless you, my dear young lady, I knew you would come to see old Mary. We have both had our changes, Miss Renie, and I can't say as you look your age."

"That's what they all tell me, Mary," said Renie, sitting down close to the fire. "You have a pretty enough baby to nurse this time. Is he good?"

"Yes, as good as can be expected; he is getting his teeth, and that makes him restless at nights, so I take him up sooner than let him lie and fret. What do you think of him, Miss Renie?"

"He is a beautiful little fellow, decidedly like his mother. I don't see any likeness to the Rudkins. Let me hold him a bit; since I am here, I may as well be friends with him."

"Yes, you had, Miss Renie. My lady just adores him."

"Mary, don't you like his mother?"

"No, Miss Renie, I don't. There, I suppose I should not have said it; old nurse used to tell me my tongue ran too fast, and I expect it does. But I don't think I am alone in this; none of us old ones serves any but the Rudkins, and while there's any of the old stock left I'll stay if they will let me. But, for all that, I can't help my feelings; they will rise, and no wonder either. How do *you* like Lady Rudkin, Miss Renie?"

"You are smiling, Mary. Well," and Renie gazed thoughtfully into the fire, "I have taken no particular fancy to her, but we shall not clash, it would not suit me, and, for

another thing, I don't think she'll interfere with me."

"No, I don't think she will, Miss Renie, if you look at her like that; it's a mercy as it's you, and not Mrs. Howard, as is left. But I'll tell you something, Miss Renie, she can just turn master round her little finger."

"Indeed! I was prepared for that, Mary; but it makes no difference to me that I see."

"Wait a bit, Miss Renie; wait a bit, and you'll alter your mind, or my name's not Muggins. Where was my lady when you came up?"

"Asleep before the drawing-room fire, looking as innocent as this child."

"Yes, I daresay; but we needn't always go by looks, Miss Renie; I have been here close upon a year, for I came a good while before baby was born, and I can't be accused of having wasted my time."

"Oh, Mary! tell me, I quite forgot to ask before. As I came along I met a person in

the south corridor, who attracted my attention. She is tall and rather stout, with a moustache on her lips and sandy hair. Who is she ?"

"Shepperton, Lady Rudkin's maid and confidante. Mrs. Shepperton was all she brought, Miss Renie, but when she got *her* here she got enough."

"Who is she, Mary ?"

"That's more than any of us know, not even Sir Bevis himself, I don't believe. You know, Miss Renie, he met my lady at Brighton and married her there, and when she came home she brought Shepperton with her as maid. From the little she has told me I gather this : that she is either a relation of my lady's, or has known her from a child. But I believe she is some sort of a relation, Miss Renie, and you had best be careful; that long neck of hers is poking round every corner continual. She and I don't get on well; I won't have her here, and my lady wished it, but I spoke my mind, and so there's

been no more said about it. I know how to attend to children, and she does not, so I can't see the use of her, except to carry tales to my lady. I told Mrs. Troost I should put you on your guard, Miss Renie, and I have done it. I don't forget the years as I was with you and Miss Addy at Dove Park. Don't you think it's a pity Mrs. Howard has no little ones, Miss Renie?"

Renie laughed.

"No, Mary, I don't. They are very contented without, and I really don't see that children are so necessary to happiness. I do not deem it well to wish too ardently for anything. If God thought it a good thing He would send them."

"You're just what you always was, Miss Renie, agreeable to wait. When a child you never cried if you could not get anything, but turned for something else. Are you tired of holding Master Rodney, Miss Renie? he's a pretty tidy weight."

"No, but you can take him, for it is high time I retraced my steps to the drawing-room; tea must be ready. I shall often pay you a visit, Mary, and nurse baby for you. It is something new to me; I never held a child in my arms before."

"Did you not? Well, it comes uncommon handy to you, and that's not the case with every one. Some young mothers is awful clumsy. My lady she can't nurse a bit, and what's more Master Baby won't let her; he is a mighty particular young gent, ain't you, my precious?" and Mary went off into an interesting conversation with the infant, to Renie's mystification, who, of course, did not understand baby language, so she wished nurse good night, and left the room.

CHAPTER VII.

Tea was just going in as Renie reached the door, and Sir Bevis and Lady Rudkin were talking and amusing themselves by the fire. My lady was quite fresh after her sleep, and looked all the prettier with her hair tumbled.

"Where have you been, Renie? asked Sir Bevis, turning. Taking a look over the place, I suppose, and you, no doubt, see some alterations?"

"Yes, a few, uncle; but my wanderings did not extend further than the nurseries. Rodney is a pretty little fellow."

"Yes, he is, Renie; your little cousin is a pretty child," replied the Baronet, thoughtfully gazing into the fire.

"Now, Bevis, don't get dreaming," exclaimed Lady Rudkin, handing him his tea. "Was your uncle always so afflicted, Miss Rudkin?"

"No, I believe not; and I don't think there is much appearance of it now, either."

"Nor I, Renie," laughed Sir Bevis; "but your aunt never seems to think five minutes together herself, so when she sees anyone else absorbed she concludes they are going into a trance. Is that not so, my dear?" and he patted her face.

Renie smiled; she perceived what sort of an understanding existed between her uncle and his young wife. She would not like her husband to pat her face, at any rate the action would never be repeated. But Lady Rudkin appeared to like it, for she turned the other side, sweet creature!

Renie did not sit up long after tea, she pleaded fatigue after her journey, and said good-night.

She kissed her uncle, but not his wife, and a shadow crossed the old man's face. But Renie could not kiss that beautiful, smiling face, do what she would.

"I will wait," said she, to herself, going upstairs, "wait and see what colour Time will put on things—they are not tinted with the shade I like best at present."

"Can I help you, Miss Renie?" asked Christie, as she seated herself by her sitting-room fire.

"No, Christie, only by going to bed, and to sleep. Where is your room?"

"Close at hand, ma'am, up these stairs, to the right, next to this, only higher."

"Are you afraid to be up there alone, Christie?"

"No, Miss Renie, not at all, and the view of the sea is lovely. But this bell is for you

to ring me, and I sleep very lightly, so you won't ever have much trouble in rousing me."

"No, I don't think I shall, Christie," said Renie, laughing, "for I don't intend to try the experiment. There is never anything the matter with me, and I am accustomed to assist myself; but I don't go to bed early, so you need not be frightened if you hear me moving."

"Very well, ma'am. I have put your dresses away, Miss Renie, and placed your night clothes by the fire, but if there is anything missing, please ring. Good-night, ma'am."

"Good-night, Christie."

When the girl had gone, Renie rose and turned the key, then passed into her bedroom and locked that door, thereby securing herself from all intruders, and looked round.

They were two old-fashioned rooms, excessively grand and proportionately dismal.

The west wing was the oldest part of the building, and the rooms were planned most curiously. These two large ones that Renie had were originally the state rooms, and the furniture was heavy and sombre.

She looked but a speck standing there, at the foot of the great bed, the bed on which the old knights, her grandfathers and great grandfather, had drawn their last breath.

It was the first time a Rudkin had so stood, so poor, in a chamber haunted by the ghost of her departed ancestors' greatness; she was staying on sufferance in the home of her fathers.

The girl heaved a sigh, and the longing of her life was repeated; it was the one regret, the one wish of her heart. At school it had been the cry when a child, now it was the cry of a woman just waiting the least change in the wind to blow her out into the world—Father. How she wanted that father God only knew. Renie did not cry, she had done

that many a time and been no better, and she was one who benefitted by experience, so she only sighed again, and returned to her seat by the fire. Once there, she allowed herself time to think, and to turn over recent events in her mind.

First and foremost in the train came Lady Rudkin. Renie knit her broad brows; she always did that when perplexed. She was going to pass judgment on the fair-skinned woman, who, had she but seen her judge, would have forgotten to laugh. There was not much mercy to be expected from that girl judge. Renie Dorothy was like her grandmother Lady Dorothy, hard as flint when put to the test. She never made a wrong judgment; her opinion of people proved always correct, and nothing could induce her to alter it.

She sat now quite still, deeply thinking; she weighed every word, look, and action of her aunt's, during the short time she had

seen her. A pause—then as deliberately and solemnly as the judge puts on the black cap and condemns his prisoner, so Renie put on *her* black cap and condemned Esther, Lady Rudkin, having found her guilty according to the dictates of her mind and conscience.

They would be on good terms because Renie intended it; but to accomplish it she must keep out of her way as much as possible. Renie did not want to look over the screen set up before her aunt oftener than she could help. It is wiser not to meddle with cracked things, for fear they come to pieces in your hands. Renie's reflections were prolonged far into the night, but she slept at last, and peacefully too.

The next day Renie walked over to Beach Cliff to see Addy and Norman. It was just perfection, she thought as she entered, everything in its place and a place for everything. But they had it all to themselves, with the exception of Minnie, a pretty little

rough haired terrier, who was just about as sensible and educated as a dog could be. She appeared at dinner, and when dessert was going on ran about the table, never upsetting anything, and stealing almonds so prettily that none could find it in their hearts to whip her. Minnie and Isabella opened the door for Renie, and while one smiled and looked pleasant, the other was equally busy barking. In the kitchen could be heard Polly displaying her ability.

"Who's the Queen of England? Victoria. Cook, bring Polly a pint of beer."

"Oh! Renie, I am so pleased to see you!" exclaimed Addy.

"Yes, delighted, Renie," continued Norman, making a droll face. "And so's Mingie, arn't you Mingie?"

With this he squeezed her so tightly that the little thing grunted again.

"Ah! Norman, I am sure you hurt Minnie?"

"Not a bit of it, she likes it; Mingie and I

are excellent friends. Now then, you little beggar, don't bite. And how are you, Renie? That's a beast of a hat you've got on. Don't look so glum; what's up? Ah! I forget; it's that young man with the black moustache. How was he when you left him, Renie?"

"Don't talk rubbish, Norman. I don't know any young man with a black moustache. And how are you two?"

"Well, Addy is only middling; but the child and I are quite well. And what do you think of your new aunt, Renie?"

"Can't quite say, Norman. I only saw her last evening."

"Oh! indeed, can't say; how polite we are all of a sudden. That means don't like her. She made a great impression on Addy the first time she saw her, so much so that she wept all night, and her lovely cheek was glued to the pillow in the morning."

"Renie, how *do* you like her?" asked Addy, dropping a ball of wool.

Both Addy and Norman were watching Renie's face; but she was cautious and "cute."

"Really Addy you press me too much; but I think I may safely echo the world's decree that she is a sweet woman. Norman, how do you like her?"

"Ahem! blest if I can tell, Renie. I can make neither head nor tail of her; she does nothing but laugh, and as for her family, there's no getting up to it; might as well try to trace Blue Beard's family as hers. I have come to the conclusion that she adopted the potato plan and sprouted on her own account. But one thing's certain, and that is she has the old gentleman's head in a noose. Now, Renie, just be candid; we sha'n't take you up for defamation of character; what do you think of her?"

"Nothing!"

"Well, you couldn't think much less. It seems to me everyone's alike, afraid of putting

their head in a trap. Therefore I shall set them the example. I don't understand Lady Rudkin, and never have done, and Addy here does not like her owing to her calling the child a 'horrid little wretch.' Now, Addy and I are in the trap, won't you join us, Renie?"

"No, Norman," replied Renie, laughing, "I will keep free and watch my opportunity to let you out. It is only a bad general that gets all his men taken captive; I am not a mouse to be caught by a piece of cheese."

"No, I don't think you are; *your* head's screwed on the right way. What on earth induced your respected uncle to tie himself up is a mystery to me; he had no more intention of it when he left here than I have this moment of getting a couple of cabbage leaves and trying to fly. I never believed it till I saw the angel smiling divinely in his face. It's a blue look out for you two girls; better make a rush for it, and get married Renie.

Take my word for it, your beauty won't keep."

Addy and Renie laughed.

"True as truth, Norman, seeing I have not any; if I had I should get your receipt for preserving it. But I intend to leave matrimony alone; at any rate till I see how it agrees with other people."

"What! don't you consider Addy and me respectable specimens of bliss?"

"Yes; but you are not the only people in the world; for my rule I want the majority, not an exception."

"Well, this is a novelty; here's a girl actually reducing matrimony to fractions. How many particles have you got it to, Renie?"

"Two; good and bad."

"That's decided, at any rate; and now, I suppose, you are about to calculate the cost of which may fall to your lot. Is there no medium, Renie, no go-between?"

"Yes, there is; but that, in my opinion, is

the worst. It is a state which seems to me I can best describe as, ' not ill enough to kill, but too ill to cure.' If I married to that sort of an existence I should go mad. I must have a man who will love me as his life, or one who thoroughly detests me, then I should know how to act; but I could not stand that horrid medium, Norman, which appears to be the fate of so many."

" It is pretty evident you are not in love, Renie, or your perception would not be so clear. Cupid throws dust in one's eyes, but mind the biter does not get bitten, as Addy here—wise little wife—says. It is astounding the amount of sober sense that follows matrimony."

" Indeed!" replied Renie, smiling; " but it greatly depends, I should say, upon your age when you enter that state. I intend to try and get a trifle before hand to assist me in crossing the bridge. I am young yet, you see?"

"No, I don't see; you are getting as old and miserable looking as Mrs. Troost; anyone would take you for eight-and-twenty, eh, Addy?"

"Yes, Norman is right, you are getting to look old and haggard."

"Then, I think, I had better go, for fear they won't take me in at Zeigleheath; I must have aged since I came out."

"Which way do you go, Renie?"

"The nearest—round by the beach; by the way, the path under the cliffs is very much worse; I must speak to uncle about it. I wonder if a rail could not be put?"

"It could, certainly, but it won't."

"Sir Bevis likes it in its dangerous condition; he told me so. It is one of the aristocratic fancies he plumes himself on possessing. If I had a child I would have a tussle with him about it; but as our only one has four legs I don't think it worth my while. And the native babies are as sure-footed as

goats. Nevertheless it is dangerous, especially when it is windy, be you as strong as a lion, so take care, Renie, and hold your petticoats down, or we shall be reading of a floating body having been seen off Hailey End; be careful, if only for the sake of the young man with the black moustache."

"Yes, I will; unless the elements compel me I shall not take a cold bath. Good-bye."

CHAPTER VIII.

Renie was a quick walker, and soon reached the cliffs. The tide was coming in, roaring with all its might, like some savage beast ready for its prey. It was a noted place for wrecks, and the boat house was just alongside a large rock.

It needed a background and a sheltered spot to stay there all the year round. Renie shivered and drew her jacket closer round her. It was a bleak, cheerless walk, and the young girl hailed Zeigleheath with delight, gloomy though it was. There was no Christmas fun

going on, the mistletoe bough was not enjoyed anywhere but in the servants' hall, and with the exception of Addy and Norman coming on Christmas and New Year's Day, and a round of ponderous and awfully heavy dinner parties, it was no different to midsummer.

Ah! how Renie pined for the low-roofed school-house, and the merry parties and jolly dances, where there was so much real enjoyment.

She seemed to be growing quite ancient amid so many rusty, musty things. The only being that appeared out of reach of the surroundings was my lady. She did a bit of needlework, played with her boy, and then called that never failing resource to her aid—sleep. What a friend is Morpheus to some! Hours did Lady Rudkin pass in his arms, and then wake up quite refreshed and gay, ready to laugh and chatter rubbish into her husband's ears, perfectly unconscious that it had rained since lunch time.

Renie did not spend much of her time downstairs; her sitting-room was the seat of much thought and labour, for she was not without ambition or an object. Her aim in life was to be an artist; that she had the talent she was fully aware, and she loved her art dearly. It was no child's play, the purpose was a very earnest one; she was trying to put herself out of the reach of want, and necessity is a stern master. But her work was done in secret; she kept a few sketches at hand, but her real study, her hope, she worked at secretly.

Ere the summer came she had become pale and thin, she had so many difficulties to contend with up in that west wing alone, so much to learn, and as her soul expanded she despised her previous pictures, and nothing could satisfy her. It was time someone came to her aid; the six months of toil were telling on the girl's frame, and she was getting disgusted for want of comparison, she saw no

one else's attempts, and she scoffed at her own. I think you will agree with me that she was in a bad way. But the west wing was not now so cheerless as formerly; Renie had plenty of life about her, and sometimes sang at her work. Christie thought there never was so sweet a singer as Miss Renie, and it spurred her on to do great things with old garments, for Renie was saving her money like a prudent girl, and she made no attempt to screen her need from her maid.

Christie Parnell was blessed with sense, and she appreciated her young mistress's resolution, and did all she could to help her.

She believed Renie was saving for a wise purpose, and nothing pleased her better than to see the pictures that grew so rapidly. She did not know which she liked best, but she really thought it was "My Pet." And Christie had a good notion—it was one of the best things the youthful artist had done. The picture was painted in water colours, and

represented a chubby baby in its chemise, with its little fat feet spread out before it, and a mischievous grin on its face.

"My Pet" was Rodney, next heir to the Rudkin lands. Renie had some little difficulty at first to prevent Christie confiding the secret of the West Wing to anyone, but when she fully understood the harm that trumpeting does she was contented to wait till her mistress had achieved some success, and meanwhile lent her aid to preserve the truth a secret, and lock the doors when anything of importance was in hand.

If a sudden call came, Renie had to go at once, for fear of exciting suspicion, but she knew all was safe, Christie would stand at her post no matter what came, and ward off all intruders. One of the most frequent and persevering of the last set was the baby boy Rodney. He had taken an immense fancy to Renie, and, being pretty strong on his legs, he never failed to make his way to her rooms

once a day, if not oftener. They could hear him stumping along the corridor with a woolly baa lamb clasped proudly to his bosom, and upon which he fell every half yard. But there was no yell of rage, he had one intention, and that was to reach Renie's rooms; so he scrambled up, lisping, "Up adin," and always arrived quite out of breath. At first Renie was rather afraid of the result of these visits, but Christie soon set that right, and took the bull by the horns without a moment's loss of time.

"The best thing we can do is to let him in when we hear him, else he'll rouse the house, and then they'll want to know why we won't have him. Locked in here with us, he's safe, and so are we, for whatever he sees he can't tell it, so I'll just tell nurse, Miss Renie, that when Master Baby comes we'll take care of him, and she needn't bother her head about him. And I'll take good care he does not teaze you."

So it was settled, and very wisely too.

Renie was not particularly fond of young children, but somehow Rodney would not be repulsed. He was so determined, he'd try and try again if he wanted to get anything. And if he made up his baby mind to sit on her knee, on her knee he'd sit, and struggle and grunt till he got up. It was that which made Renie take to him, and then he was such a lovely boy, no one could be indifferent to him. So many and many a day saw those two when work was over sitting in the window seat clasped in each other's arms, watching the sun lower itself gradually into the sea. Then the baby fingers would stroke her cheek, "All done, aunty?"

What a wonderful charm there is in baby's fingers to be sure! The soft, clinging, lingering touch which asks protection so confidently and artlessly, and makes the weakest woman feel brave. Ah! little whispering loves; God's blessed little peacemakers, when

Death's shadows gather round me may baby fingers stroke my wrinkled face!

It was one evening, when the sun, as if aware of his grandeur and loth to go, had taken an unusually long time to sink into his rocking cradle, the sea, that someone, unperceived, entered the sitting-room.

It formed a pretty picture, the two so intent on the ball of fire, their cheeks pressed close together, one dimpled hand stretched out, noting the direction of the disappearing orb. The child, all eagerness, with tossed curls, parted lips, and flushed cheeks, clasped lightly, yet all safely, in the arms of the thoughtful girl.

There was something secure and trustful in that face, something that made a silent promise of great things.

Sir Bevis, for it was he, stood and looked with half a smile on his face, and at last, as if unable to contain himself any longer, heaved a deep sigh of thankfulness.

"Ah! uncle, how you startled me," exclaimed Renie, turning. "I never heard you enter."

"Pa, dot a deal of vind," said master baby, sitting bolt upright on Renie's lap; "and, aunty, dot a deal of brus."

Sir Bevis laughed; not so Renie, the brus was ringing in her ears. So much for Christie's knowledge of infants. It was pretty evident that what Rodney had seen for the last half year was fixed in his mind, and he only awaited the power of speech to impart it to everyone.

He had already conquered the key to the mystery, namely, the word "brush," which no doubt he had heard Renie or Christie make use of.

"Rodney, darling, nurse will be looking for you; it is past your usual time, and I am not dressed yet. Run along, pet."

The little fellow looked very much inclined to say "me stay," but he loved his aunty

dearly, so he made no demur beyond kissing her, and saying—

"Dood-bye, aunty," and toddled away.

"That's a little man," said his father, kissing the round cheek, and watching him along the corridor. It is a queer notion, that of his calling you Aunty, Renie."

"Yes, it is, uncle; I have told him it is 'cousin,' and I have heard Lady Rudkin tell him the same thing; but somehow he persists in its being aunty."

"Well, I am not averse to the fancy if you are not, it seems far more suitable, and I wish it were the case; at any rate it is an agreeable fiction, so we will leave it alone."

"Why, uncle?"

"Aye, 'why,' child," and the old man sighed again. "Renie," and he sank into a chair close by the window, "Renie, do you know that child, that baby's life, is like a ton weight on my conscience; I wake in the still night, and out of the darkness there comes a plain-

tive cry—my baby's—I feel the drops start on my brow, for I know I must leave him some day next to alone in the world. I wish it had been a girl, because I could have managed better. When I die I shall leave Rodney without a guide in the midst of temptations. I cannot expect to live many years; my time is already run. But, Renie, I want you to be a guide to my boy; promise me," and he stretched out his shrivelled hands. "Promise me that when I am gone you will take care of my child."

Renie shrank back.

"Ah! uncle, how am I to keep such a promise, even if I make it? Our paths will be so opposite; and then there is Lady Rudkin?"

Sir Bevis winced.

"Never mind his mother, don't count upon her; she is young and pretty, and no doubt would marry again. Renie, there is no one but you; you and the child are the last of

the name of Rudkin; will you not cling together? I know it is a great burthen to ask you to carry, but I have every confidence in your ability to accomplish it, and I freely give my baby's future to your keeping. I will accord you the power if you will only act. He is attached to you. Renie, I beseech you to protect and love my child."

"I do love him, uncle."

"Yes, I know you do, I have seen that; but it is another love I crave for my lad, more of a mother's love, a love that will succour him in time of need, and correct his faults, a steady hand always extended to him. Renie, I know you are equal to it; will you not accept the trust?"

"I feel afraid to take it, uncle, I am so young and poor, with my way to make if it is ever to be made; and I am not content to stand for ever on the same spot, I may tell you. The boy would be a drag to me, and, then, if I married how then? if I take Rodney

I must waive all other claims, and do right by him; it is too sacred a charge to put aside for another fancy, therefore give me time to think it over before I make any promise."

"Ah, Renie, I know what is passing in your mind, how I have kept my brother's trust. Child, I know I have fallen short; that I have acquitted myself badly, but I will try to make up for it now, and you will not be so very poor if I can only live a little longer. But we are told 'Out of evil comes good.' God grant it so in this case. Think it over, Renie, and don't discard my child because of the selfishness of his father."

Without another word he stooped and pressing a kiss upon the girl's broad forehead, left the room.

The dressing bell rang, but Renie did not move; she sat with her hands lying idly on her knee, staring out over the sea. She was trying to realise the full importance of the trust; her sense of justice was great, she

would do right, and without she felt pretty sure of faithfully discharging her duty, she would not undertake it. True, the child was as yet a baby, and he might not live; if he did they would be both getting old and experienced together, so that what the eye coveted the hand would be able to grasp. If she refused her old uncle, was it a kind Christian act? No; God intends us to help one another, even if we suffer in the attempt ourselves; and as for the way he had kept her father's trust, it was not for her to determine. That is the work of the Great Judge.

So Renie resolved that when he again asked, her answer should be ready. She certainly did feel in a maze; her own success yet to be achieved—how, she was not by any means sure, yet she could not put down the "bruss," as Rodney called it. Something told her to struggle on, and lay by a store, for that when the start did take place she would go off with a run. There was certainly

no lack of faith or hope about the girl-artist. Doubts and fears were quickly dispelled by the entrance of the brisk Christie.

"Mercy on us! Miss Renie; it's five minutes off dinner, and you not commenced to dress. Was there *ever* the likes of this?"

"I really cannot say, Christie," replied Renie, laughing and slipping her dress off. I shall be ready, never fear, and if not Sir Bevis can't be vexed, for it was he who kept me."

"The master up here! whatever put it into his head, Miss Renie?"

"Having something to say, I suppose; at any rate, our grand secret had a narrow escape, Christie."

"How, Miss Renie, there was nothing out?"

"No, nothing except master baby's tongue; and he informed his papa that 'Aunty had a deal of bruss.' Fortunately Sir Bevis never pressed the matter, and I

persuaded the young monkey to go. But it just shows you what it is to let children see things."

"Well, I should as soon have expected that stuffed linnet to start piping as master baby to begin repeating things; he never seemed to notice what you did as long as he got amused himself. We must just keep him out, Miss Renie, that's all."

"I am afraid it's too late to commence that. Never mind, Christie, I shall be ready by the time his tongue is."

CHAPTER IX.

A FEW days after the scene in Renie's room, Sir Bevis said to her—

"Renie, you are not looking quite well; you are pale and thin. I fear you find us too dull. Ask some of your friends to stay a few months with you; I shall be pleased to see them."

"Thank you, uncle, I will, but only one at a time."

Without delay Renie wrote to Lucy Northwood, whose epistles arrived every Sunday morning regularly.

The Northwoods were kind to Renie in speaking of her to people of influence; and the last letter received from Lucy contained the following welcome news:—

"An old gentleman, a retired tradesman, but immensely wealthy, desired Miss Northwood's friend to select him two pictures, and he would buy them at a fair price; and if she did them well he would be happy to recommend her to his friends."

This, of course, was a great step taken, and after due care and consideration two were selected and sent off, one being Christie's favourite "My Pet," the other a landscape near Moordart. Since then nothing had been heard of either the old gentleman or Lucy, and Renie was rather fidgety.

But she need not have been. The truth was she had taken them all by storm; the hard work had not been for nothing. The west wing with all its gloom had sheltered a genius.

Old Mr. Twinkleton walked up and down before the pictures, rubbing his hands.

"Bless my soul and body! it's just wonderful; and a friend of yours, Miss Lucy! Why, she'll have a little fortune made before she's thirty. Couldn't have believed such a thing possible; and no teaching to speak of! Entirely Nature's gift—a natural talent, madam,—a natural talent! Pity she is not your girl, Mrs. Northwood."

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Twinkleton, it is; but she is poor, though of gentle birth. How much are they worth?"

"Eh? These pictures? Worth? Ah! that's just the question. This is not a case of merit, but of name; we pay for name, madam, and so must your young friend. She is a beginner, no one knows her, she has no name, so she must be contented with what anyone will give her till she makes one, then she can put her own price on her pictures. This (pointing to 'My Pet'), if it were the

production of some R.A., an artist of note, would be cheap at fifty or sixty; as it is, I will give her fifteen for it, and seven for the bit of scenery. Sound is a great thing in this world, my dear Mrs. Northwood, we all follow it. You can tell your young friend, Miss Lucy, to send along some more, and I will dispose of them amongst my friends ?"

"Thank you very much, Mr. Twinkleton; I will do so at once."

The letter was not posted when Renie's note arrived, and Mrs. Northwood at once decided to let Lucy go, and remain as long as they liked.

The acceptance and good news were sent off that night, and you can imagine Renie's delight. As for single-minded Christie Parnell, she first laughed, and then, like the generality of women, had a good cry, after which she said she felt much better.

"There now, Miss Renie, don't laugh at my telling fortunes with a tea cup; yours is

coming true, sure enough. It was all plain as daylight, only you would not see it; but I did. There you was all elevated among the tea leaves, and though I turned you three times, you stuck as fast as a leech!"

"Well, I promise not to ridicule you again, Christie. Miss Northwood will be here on Thursday."

"Indeed, ma'am! Then I had best be overhauling your things, for I suppose she'll bring the latest styles with her?"

"No, indeed, she won't; Lucy has not got any longer purse than myself, and I daresay you can improve her things for her, Christie."

"I shall be very pleased, I am sure, ma'am. But, Miss Renie, don't you think if we was to go to Stokely, say to-morrow, you would see something you fancied? Mrs. Howard gets a deal of her things there, or they send to London for what's ordered."

"Yes, Christie, I am certain I should if I went; but I don't intend to. I know what

you are thinking, that I can now afford some fresh clothes, having made a little money. But I am not going to spend it, my good Christie; but I'll tell you what I'll do, and that is, if fine to-morrow, send you by the quarter to ten train to get me some new trimmings for a bonnet and hat, some gloves, and a present for yourself."

"Oh, no, Miss Renie!"

"I say oh, yes, Christie! Get black net and lace, and some white lilies or some pretty quiet flower, and black for my hat also."

"*Do* have some colour, Miss Renie!"

"Well, you may get some good pink roses, not fully opened, if you choose, but nothing loud. And go to Joyce's, and get me more paints; but I will make you a list."

Thursday, the 3rd of June, was a beautiful day, and Lucy grew quite animated as she drove up to Zeigleheath. Sir Bevis and my lady were out, but Renie was at the Hall door ready to receive her. Lucy had altered,

and for the better; decidedly, she was getting quite pretty, and her comic face was very inviting."

"Alive and well, Renie, my child? I am almost smothered with the dust; I suppose it never rains here."

"Oh, yes, it does, though. Make yourself at home; these are my rooms, and you are here for to-night, because I did not know whether you had got over your objection to sleeping alone."

"Oh, no, indeed; especially in a strange place. Pilgrim Fathers! what a ghostly hole! How many hobgoblins do you keep within these walls?"

"Not any that I am acquainted with."

"What a disappointment, and, at the same time, a relief! But it is a fine old place; you Rudkins are a noble race. How is the papoose? Any more in prospect?"

"Thank Heaven! no. One's enough!" exclaimed Renie, thinking of her charge.

Rodney's not half a bad child, Lucy; but you had better 'mind your heye!' as Norman says, for his ears are wide open, also his eyes."

"So's his mouth, I suppose, and we cannot do better than keep it filled. Children ar'n't so sharp when they are munching. And now, Renie, show me the result of your labours. Mr. Twinkleton is quite ready to take your pictures. Well to be you, young lady, getting twenty-two pounds at a time! But I can't compliment you on your good looks; you are a deal too thin and pale. I suspect it's being all alone in these spectral chambers, though you don't like to own to it."

"Indeed, it's not; I believe I got dispirited with my own daubs."

The cases were opened, and sketch after sketch displayed. Lucy was petrified at the number, and the crispness and finish which characterized them all. There was not one

uncertain or unnecessary stroke, which is, to my thinking, one of the great charms in art. The fancy pictures were truly original—not one single hackneyed idea, and not two faces alike. Some countenances beamed with intelligence—wit sparkled in the eye—while others were inanimate beauties, whose very placidity almost put you to sleep. Each face bespoke the state of the mind in a wonderful manner, and drew the gazer into their joy or sorrow, as the case might be.

Truly, Renie Dorothy Rudkin had two modes of speaking, one with her tongue and the other with her pencil. Renie had a living within her fingers, not alone by reason of her talent, but by reason of her perseverance, which is a quality not often found in geniuses. Take half our present artists and authors, they are in difficulties and too frequently die in them, and all because they reckon too much on their ability. They feel it incumbent upon them when they make fifty pounds to spend

more than half, and render themselves unfit for work for the next fortnight. "Never mind, I will make more, say they."

True; but time goes on, and younger men come forward with constitutions as yet unimpaired with fast life, and the old and shaking hand is pushed on one side. They have put nothing away, and their day is gone by; so they slip down, down to the very depths of poverty and degradation, and too often a man who once graced the tables of the highest in the land, whose very name breathed of fame and glory, has a pauper's funeral.

I am undecided whether one of the above-mentioned class is not a truer acceptation of the word "fool" than the soft Billy of the village. They are not as wise as the child, who, seeing the rays of light slanting through the window, tries, with his baby hand, to grasp them; for they make no effort to gather the flowers with which God so bountifully strews their path.

Lucy turned away from the last picture, and kissed the pale face.

"I wonder what Mademoiselle would say, Renie; she always stuck to it that 'Renie had the taste.'"

"And does no one know of this?"

"No, only Christie and your people; I have not told even Addy or Norman. By-the-bye, you must go there to-morrow."

The next day saw the two girls walking round to Beach Cliff, where they received the usual kind welcome and an invitation to spend an evening in the next week, on the occasion of a party.

"We have not invited uncle or Lady Rudkin," said Addy; "it is not a state affair."

"No, but there is a neighbour of yours asked, Renie, and a very nice fellow he is too. Better put your heart out of reach, Miss Northwood."

"To tell the truth, I don't know where

mine is at present, Mr. Howard; I have a dim recollection of last feeling it while staying with my aunt."

"Norman, who is this mysterious neighbour? I don't know any but the rooks."

"Don't you; well, it's Count Helring."

"So he's come to the top at last. I never believed in the existence of Count Carl Helring."

Addy laughed.

"You were always hard of belief, Renie; but *I* never quite credited the truth of that report till Norman made his acquaintance."

"Renie," asked Lucy, on the way home, "what are you going to wear on Tuesday night? I fear I shall cut but a sorry figure by the side of Mrs. Howard, who seems to abound in beautiful dresses."

"I really don't know; I shall leave it to Christie, and you had better do the same. She has excellent taste, and will touch your things up wonderfully."

"Very well; but who is this Count Helring, you did not seem to know anything about him?"

"Which I don't, indeed; as you heard me say, I never believed there was such a person. All I have ever known is this: there, in that clump of trees, close to the Willow Glen, which joins the extreme end of the East Park, stands a house. If we were on the top of the cliff we could see it, but as we are not, you must trust me to describe it to you. It is a most curious looking place, only one storey high, with a thatched roof in which owls and bats have their homes. The walls are of a stone, I forget the name of it, but it glistens like crystallized sugar. There was a quarry of it years ago close by the sea, and some say it was the salt water splashing over it that petrified it. I cannot answer for the truth of it, and the once quarry is now a cave, in which the angry sea roars, and which is always

covered with foam. In my great grandfather's time there appeared one day an old man, a German, who was a naturalist from pure love of the same. He spent weeks in the village, collecting specimens of birds, fish, flowers, etc., and became very friendly with the master of Zeigleheath. The end of it was he persuaded my great grandfather to sell him some land, and he selected that by the Willow Glen, on account of its wild beauty, and there built himself a house of the crystallized sugar stone. The floors are tiled, and the fire placed on the ground in a sort of basket. The halls and passages are of the crystal, arched and supported on pillars, I have never been inside, but they say it is like Fairy Land by lamp light. The half-mad old hermit was a German noble of high rank, named something (I forget the word) Helring. He christened the queer place 'Chiverton,' after the wild birds' cry 'chevy.' In course of time he died, but it descended to the next

heir, and so on till the last Count Carl Helring, who married an English lady, a great singer. They spent a good deal of their time at 'Chiverton.' Before I was born the Count died, leaving the Countess with one child, a boy, called after his father, Carl. She immediately packed up and made for the Count's people, where I suppose they have stayed. Nothing was heard of them, and I was taken to see the house once during Miss Webb's time, but no one seemed to be certain that the Countess and her boy existed, as nothing had been seen or heard of them for years and years. However, they are alive, it appears, since Norman has made the Count's acquaintance; I feel quite curious to see the creature. I don't know that I have related their history correctly, but that is the Moordart version of it, and what I was told."

"Never mind, I don't suppose they could tell it better themselves, Renie; to me there is nothing so mystifying as delving after

departed people. So to satisfy me you need not go further than the present Count, who has a mother, and once had a father. But I should like to see the place—that is to say, in the middle of the day, when the sun's out—but no moonlight rambles for me, or I should be fancying I saw the old curiosity man. How old will the present Count be?"

"Ah! you've got an eye to business, have you? it does not look much as if you had left your heart on the Grand Parade. Let me see, tradition says he was ten or eleven when the old Count died, so that makes him about thirty. I wonder what he thinks of 'Chiverton?' when I saw it, the weeds reached nearly to the roof, such a God-forgotten place! everything run to seed!"

"Ah! he'll like it, especially if he inherits the hermit's taste; he'll spend the live-long day skinning and stuffing animals. Pilgrim Fathers! I hope he'll steep his paws well in boiling water before Tuesday evening. I never

could endure odours of any sort, not even pomatum."

But Lucy might have spared herself any fears on the subject. When Tuesday arrived and the carriage came round, Sir Bevis was there to put them in. Of late he had seemed to cling to Renie, and at times regard her in a beseeching sort of fashion that made her heart ache for the poor old man. But no second opportunity had occurred for the mention of the trust, and Renie thought it better to wait his time. One event pleased her, and that was her uncle liking her friend; he at once pronounced Lucy Northwood to be a candid, honest girl, with plenty of sense and fun in her. Lady Rudkin followed her husband as if she was afraid of being left behind, but kept a good distance off, and proceeded carefully, as if fearful of pitfalls. Her opinion was not at the surface! but one thing was obvious, she desired to keep friends with both girls.

"Renie, my dear," cried Sir Bevis, pulling the white knitted shawl closer round her, "give our love to Addy and Norman, and don't hasten home; we shall not be uneasy."

"Ah! no," responded Lady Rudkin, laughing; "we sha'n't fret."

Renie smiled.

"We won't put your tender feelings to the test, Lady Rudkin; we shall return in good time."

Lucy settled herself comfortably on the cushions, and then remarked—

"Renie, my child, it seems to me that you and your fair aunt go a trifle out of your route to give each other a polite probe sometimes."

"Well, may be we find it gratifying."

"Perhaps; but depend upon it you won't find it profitable; there are more days than one, and your uncle can't live for ever!"

"True; but I am not a fixture here; my time is his time, and that makes me regardless of consequences."

"I perceive that, and also that it would not break your aunt's heart if this equipage blew over the cliffs with us."

"Lucy!"

"You are surprised. I thought you were aware that I only kept my eyes shut during the night?"

There was no time to say more, for the carriage turned into the gate at Beach Cliff. They were in pretty good time, and Addy made several improvements in their toilets with her neat clever fingers. It was quite a homely party, some of the near families, and the lion of the evening was undoubtedly the long lost Count.

It was perfectly light, and the garden looked unusually pretty with its summer house on one corner of the lawn, and its wonderful stained glass windows that represented four seasons.

Count Helring was just a shade late, and appeared to great advantage half in the conservatory and half in the drawing-room, with

his military figure drawn to its full height. Don't imagine because I have used the word military that he must needs be one of those sleepy dolts of men, who find their way into our drawing-rooms, with their hair plastered down on their low brows, their faces drawn to their fullest length, and able to do nothing but drawl "ya-as."

I often wonder where those donkeys hide themselves when Her Majesty reviews her troops and gets almost melted to tears at the sight of so many brave defenders of their Queen and country. One thing is certain, her eye does not rest on the Honourable Alphonso de Vane, or Lieutenant Horace Cassmoline.

Count Carl Helring had served in the army, like all Germans, and he was a creditable specimen of a soldier, all fire and intelligence, with "divilment" in the very twist of his shoulders. He was handsome, and it was an uncommon type of beauty.

His face was like alabaster, not pasty, and the features were fine for a man, especially the nose; the mouth was arched, and had a proud defiant look, which was added to by the keen gaze of the grey eye and the way he carried his head. The brow was broad and high, and the soft, rich brown hair combed simply back. A good, well-grown moustache adorned his upper lip. There was something wonderfully fresh and natural about the man; his hair was the colour God intended it to be, having no oil upon it, and the moustache was not waxed at the ends.

The society of Count Carl Helring was invigorating and refreshing, his ideas and perception were quick, he had travelled and learned a great deal, and he possessed an attractive and unobtrusive manner of relating his adventures and experiences that interested and amused his listeners. His voice was pleasant, as also his accent, which was unmistakably foreign. The only thing that

could be found fault with were his ears—they were a trifle too large and disposed to be red, as if they had been frost-bitten in his youth. No sooner was he introduced than he commenced as fast as possible, and his mouth was flexible.

"You play croquet, Mrs. Howard? You have such a very nice ground."

"No, we don't care for the game."

"Really, I am surprised at that. I am very fond of it; we played a great deal when I was at Scarboro'."

"That reminds me," said Norman Howard, pleasantly, "I want you to tell me something about Homburg, Count; my wife and I think of going there this year for our trip."

"Well, Homburg is a very nice place, very nice; I and my friend had great fun there; there were two such charming girls staying at the hotel, and we had great larks with them; one is married since, I heard. I never enjoyed any time so much as that. Yes, I do not

think you could go to a nicer place than Homburg."

"Ah, well, we must see about it."

"I think of going there myself, so perhaps we'll meet. It is a great pity you don't play croquet here, Mrs. Howard."

Mrs. Howard made some suitable reply, and evidently was amused, while Renie and Lucy arrived at the decided conclusion that he was croquet mad; nor did he allow it to cease here, he returned to the charge several times during the evening with renewed vigour.

There was, of course, music after dinner, some of which pleased the Count. One lady was not, however, so fortunate as to gain his approval; her music was powerful, not melodious, and all that can be said of her is, that she would eat tender, as the muscles of her back were in constant motion from the commencement of the set of fireworks she had chosen to the ending. The distracted

Count expressed his feelings in sundry low-breathed "Mein Gotts," while Lucy afterwards assured Renie that she expected the notes to come up by the roots, and considering the way the lady clawed and tore at the piano it was not astonishing.

The Zeigleheath carriage putting in an appearance, Renie and Lucy had to take their leave, having spent a most enjoyable evening. Both girls agreed in liking the Count, and Renie hoped her uncle would be friendly with him. Somehow of late Sir Bevis had appeared averse to company.

CHAPTER X.

The next day the heat was intense, and Lucy and Renie deemed it advisable to postpone their walk till the evening after dinner. It was too hot to attack any work determinedly, so sitting themselves cosily in the window, which was wide open, they began to chatter listlessly, but soon the conversation got very interesting.

"Lucy, I did not quite understand you last night about Lady Rudkin. What do you mean?"

"The truth is, Renie, you would rather

not understand me. I don't believe my opinion is one particle different to yours, only you are cautious, as of old. Well, it is not a bad thing; caution is one of the most useful gifts God has bestowed upon mankind, but to be used in moderation, or you may outwit yourself."

"Just so; but is it for me to deteriorate the wife my uncle has chosen? I have kept a still tongue, because there are plenty to wag without mine. But you don't seem to like her?"

"No, I don't. I can't like anyone I can't comprehend."

"Why, you are as bad as Norman; he says she is a mystery to him."

"And so she is to me. She strikes me as having some dread on her mind, as if always watching for something. Her chief source of uneasiness seems to rest in the post-bag. She never really eats her breakfast till all the letters are out. And another thing astonishes

me; and that is her desire to be friends with everyone. Who is that woman with the moustache that I see dodging about such a deal?"

"Shepperton, Lady Rudkin's maid. Nurse can't bear that woman. She told me to be careful of her when first I came. And I have been. I don't think I have spoken to her more than twice."

"Indeed; then that accounts for her violent fancy for me, which I could not return, and sharply let her see it. Since she could not make anything of you she tried her hand on me, after I had been here three days, no doubt hoping that I was made of more yielding stuff. But I soon gave her the cold shoulder, for I don't remember ever taking a greater dislike to any creature than that male-cum-female."

Renie burst out laughing.

"You'd better not let my lady hear you call her pet such an astounding name."

"I don't see very much amiss with it; she *is* masculine, and yet feminine, so can you find a better?"

"No; and let me tell you, before I forget, that there is to be an horticultural exhibition at Whimperly next week, and I suppose we are to go."

"Thank Providence; perhaps we shall come across croquet!"

The Flower Show at Whimperly was under the patronage of Sir Bevis and Lady Rudkin, and, as Renie predicted, the day being fine, they all set off in a body, even to Rodney and his nurse.

Whimperly was a much better village than Moordart, and more accessible; therefore, the show was held there to insure its being better attended.

Lucy Northwood was not disappointed. The Count was there, with the Countess, his mother, on his arm.

She was a pretty, gentle looking woman,

with a particularly winning voice, and little Rodney made no objection to being caressed and petted by her and her son. Sir Bevis thawed sufficiently to bid them welcome to Zeigleheath, and proposed calling with Lady Rudkin. This was just what the Count desired, because then he could have a game of croquet with the young ladies, and his eyes danced with pleasure.

The band played, and the sun poured down all that afternoon, while the two girls and Count Helring sauntered about. He told them how he had strayed to the boundary line between Chiverton and Zeigleheath, but seeing nothing but a wood, had returned for fear of man-traps and spring guns.

Renie laughed, and answered frankly—

"What a coward you must be; I should certainly have made an attempt to explore the wood. Do you know I never believed in your existence. Chiverton has been empty all my life, and I expected it to remain so."

"Oh; and you are sorry I am come back?"

"No, not a bit; you will be one more in this dreary place, and besides you are good fun."

"I am glad to hear it. Well, I don't know whatever made me come home. I think it was my conscience."

"I wish you would give a little of it to other people then, perhaps we might get home before we were quite cooked. Every morsel of colour will be out of your bonnet, Lucy!"

"Well, there's one comfort, it will all go together, so that it will only be three shades paler, and one remove from white. This delicate crape never stands, worse luck. That's the way I console myself for being plain; I stand a pretty good chance of retaining what I have got, whereas beauties like Lady Rudkin must be in mortal dread of fading."

"You are a philosopher, Miss Northwood;

but Lady Rudkin will not fade for many years ; she is young to be your aunt, Miss Rudkin ?"

" Very ;" and Renie's lips shut close.

That night Lucy aroused Renie suddenly, by saying—

" Renie, awake ; what's that bell ?"

" Bell !" repeated the bewildered Renie, starting up and listening; " I don't know. I never heard it before ; what a peculiar sound ?"

" Dreadful—it makes me creep—it is like a convent bell. Pilgrim Fathers, I hope our eyes are not going to be delighted by a strange sight ; I never rested in the bosom of such a high family before ; you are all blood, and, consequently, wrapped up in mystery which I find too exciting. Good heavens, what's *that?*"

" There," said Renie, tittering in spite of herself, " that's what you get for ridicule ; it's Christie up. I wonder what's the matter."

Without waiting a second, Renie slipped on to the floor, followed by Lucy, and opened the door.

There, at the bottom of the narrow turret stairs, stood Christie, her eyes wide open with terror.

"Oh! Miss Renie, do listen to that bell, its like as if it was going to bury us all."

It was truly like a funeral bell; its awfully solemn, deep tones echoed through the old building, and the sound came from Sir Wildbrand's Tower.

The girl Christie began to cry bitterly.

"Oh! ma'am is it the judgment, think you?"

"Judgment!" grunted Miss Northwood; "might as well ask if it's a deluge, Renie," said she, catching her arm, "where are the others that they don't hear it?"

"Asleep, I suppose, Lucy; and it has stopped now, so there's no use disturbing them, that I see."

"Did you count how many times it tolled, Miss Renie?" gasped her maid.

"No, I did not; did you?"

"Bless you, no ma'am, I could not to have saved my sinful life."

"Then you'd better begin a better one to-morrow."

"Are you going back to bed ma'am?"

"To be sure; you don't surely suppose I am going to pass the remainder of the night out here? You can't do better than go too."

The girl remounted the stairs, and Renie and Lucy entered their room and secured the door.

"Renie," announced Lucy, twisting her eel-like body into the high bed, "you can't think how disappointed I am not to have seen a couple of modest skeletons dancing the scarf dance out there with their shrouds; that dismal bell was a befitting preliminary."

"My dear Lucy, pray reserve your horrid ideas till daylight; I have no wish to see

anything of the sort. No one will credit what we heard, when we tell them; it never happened before that I recollect."

"But what is a bell put there for? to alarm the village, I suppose, in case of robbers or fire?"

"There is no bell, Lucy; the top of the tower is simply a room commanding a good view."

"No bell!" exclaimed Lucy, "then what was it we heard?"

"A bell without doubt, but where the sound came from is a puzzle to me, for there is no great bell anywhere about this place, that's what made Christie so afraid. I thought you did not clearly understand, Lucy."

"No, indeed I didn't; I thought I would go to sleep, but I have changed my mind now. Renie, aren't you terrified nearly out of your wits?"

"No, I can't say that I am, but I don't feel too comfortable."

"I don't mind stopping here as long as I have you, but I should die if I had to sleep here alone. Renie, however have you managed all winter by yourself?"

"Very well; nothing happened to disturb me before, and I question whether I should have heard it to-night if it had not been for you."

"Are you going to mention it, Renie?"

"I don't know, I think I shall ask some of the old servants about it; it may be one of those mysteries you joked about a little time ago; it reminds one of the 'Inchcliff Bell.'"

"Ugh!" groaned the brave Lucy, drawing the bed clothes over her head, and saying in a guttural tone to Renie—

"If I am smothered before morning you'll tell the people what killed me?"

"Certainly; and see you have decent burial. But if you are bent upon steaming away like a hotbed, you had better go to the other side, else there will be no one left to relate the

doleful tale or make the necessary inquiries. Do you know you are positively smoking, Lucy?"

"Well, my head does feel on fire at the top," said Lucy, popping it out. "Renie, there's a Christian, clap a pillow on it, you perhaps recollect what Professor Hamilton used to tell us about electricity in the hair?"

"Perfectly, but your ideas are slightly confused just now; your head's not on fire, my child!"

"That's a blessing, then. I have hopes of not being gathered to my fathers at present."

The story of the Bell, which was speedily noised abroad by the chatter-loving Christie, created a due amount of wonderment and awe, but no one paid particular attention to it till she related how the young ladies had heard it as well as herself. Then a full explanation was requested and given by Renie, in a calm, matter-of-fact tone, that left no room for that too frequent guest, exaggeration.

Sir Bevis was quite shaken, and leant back to screen his pale face, while my lady, with her innocent countenance, expressive of the most perfect perplexity and bewitching terror, insisted upon having it told all over again from the very beginning, which modest request Lucy Northwood complied with. But scarcely had she proceeded half way, when Sir Bevis, raising his chocolate to his lips, said—

"Never mind repeating it, my dear Miss Northwood, you will make Lady Rudkin quite nervous, and for another reason, I object to such idle fancies getting circulated. Some one must have pulled their room bell in their sleep, and in the stillness the sound reached the west wing. By the way, Renie, my love, your part of the house is famous for an echo."

"The echo of a bell, Sir Bevis?"

"No, Miss Northwood, I believe not; I only wish I could say so, it would be such a satisfactory way of settling last night's business."

Renie said nothing, and the subject dropped, which was evidently what the Baronet desired. But Lucy's curiosity was fairly aroused, and in the afternoon she insisted that they should go and take a cup of tea with comfortable Mrs. Troost in her room.

"You know, Renie, she has lived here all her days, and must be acquainted with the legends of your family, though you are not."

"True, there never was so perfect a dunce in that respect as I; there may be a hundred and fifty stories for what I know."

CHAPTER XI.

Mrs. Troost was charmed to see them, and quickly had tea brought. Hers was a snug room; it looked into one of the orchards, and the apple trees touched the window, on the ledge of which sat Topsy, her black cat, asleep in the sun. Some lace of my lady's was bleaching on the long grass, also some garments composed of lace and insertion belonging to master baby.

"Miss Northwood, will you try some of this pound cake? I made it myself the other week. I suppose it's no use asking *you*, Miss Renie?"

"Not a bit, Mrs. Troost, unless you want me to tumble off this chair presently; but Lucy, great gourmand, will have no objection to eat my share as well as her own."

"Now you hear my propensity, you had better put your cake out of my reach, Mrs. Troost."

"Nay, nay, Miss Northwood, it's only natural for girls and boys to like sweets; bitters come fast enough without counting them. You shall not only have this, but I'll make one every week as long as you are here, and some for you to take home—there now," and the worthy dame stopped for breath.

"Heaven bless you for a good old soul! you will earn the everlasting gratitude of the juvenile Northwoods, Mrs. Troost," and Lucy at once set about devouring her slice of pound cake.

"Have you heard any news to-day, Mrs. Troost?" asked Renie.

"News! Miss Renie? let me consider. Yes,

I have; but I daresay its no news to you. Chiverton's got its master at last. Now there's a chance for one of you two young ladies to be a Countess, my gracious! You would not care for my pound cake *then*, Miss Lucy?"

"I am not so sure about that. We have made the acquaintance of the Count, Mrs. Troost; we met him at Beach Cliff, and he will visit here, no doubt, so you will be obliged to concoct a dish of snails and set the table without forks."

"Laws sakes! Miss Northwood, what are you saying?"

"Gospel, Mrs. Troost, gospel; and the Count, dear boy, plays croquet eternally. He had better stipulate to have mallets and balls in the next world, or take his along with him. Perhaps the attendant saints might be decoyed into playing a game, eh, Renie?"

Renie was not able to speak, owing to being convulsed with laughter at the sight of the

housekeeper's face. She was petrified, and sat with her spoon midway to her open mouth.

"Lucy, for shame, you wicked girl! Count Helring is very nice and awfully handsome; only Lucy is rather smitten, and does not want to acknowledge it, even to herself. We have heard of children being frightened by their own shadows before now, haven't we, Mrs. Troost?"

"Yes, indeed, Miss Renie; and now look, Miss Lucy, you alluring young creature, I shall just put the master up to asking the Count and Countess round sharp. But it's an awful risk you runs, my dear young lady; we know nothing to speak of about men from foreign parts; he may have a wife and family, all well and hearty, stowed away all snug."

"Dear me! you speak of them as if they were red herrings, Mrs. Troost; it's not often that wives and children are so obliging as to be stowed away. To say the least of it, it's

a charming prospect, and I regret you have given me it right on the top of your rich cake, as they mayn't agree."

"Ah, it's all very well for you to laugh, Miss Lucy, but it was only last night, as Frost was a reading the life of a bigamist, it made me turn all of a heap, that it did."

"I shall be careful, depend upon it, and we will send him to drink an afternoon cup of tea with you, Mrs. Troost. You shall put him through his catechism, and if he does not answer to your satisfaction, I won't have him."

"Very good, Miss Lucy, I'll keep my eye open; and now what's the news, Miss Renie, as you wanted to know if I had heard ?"

"Well, did you hear anything last night ?"

"Nothing but the mice, which I am quite accustomed to."

"Well, one noise was not a mouse, unless mice are musical at times."

"That's not likely; it'll be that snail-eater come to serenade Miss Lucy, now !"

The two girls burst out laughing, and Lucy promptly ejaculated—

"Heaven forbid! if that's the way he serenades, it was 'Cease thy reposing,' and no mistake; pity he did not follow it up with 'Cease melting,' for that's what I was engaged in after."

"I think I had better tell you, Mrs. Troost, or we shall have to go before the end. We were aroused by a bell last night," and Renie related the affair.

Mrs. Troost never said one word till she had finished, and then crossing her plump hands quietly, she said—

"So I'm right after all!"

"What, did you hear it?"

"No, Miss Lucy, I did not, but I am not astonished at you doing it."

"But Sir Bevis tried to persuade us it was fancy!"

"Ah, he did that on account of his young wife; these old tales don't do talked about."

"Now, Mrs. Troost, just please to explain it to us, there is something to be told, I can see by your face—and we are all attention."

"Well, I'll tell you, but remember, both of you, not one single word of this must you repeat; if Sir Bevis knew I had told you, he would, I believe, box my ears, old as I am, and turn me out. Mrs. Howard does not know it, and never must: it's a shadow in your family, Miss Renie, and ever will be. You never knew you had an aunt, did you?"

Renie opened her eyes in astonishment.

"No; have I, Mrs. Troost?"

"Well, you had, and a beautiful one too, poor creature!"

"Where is she?"

"Lost, Miss Renie, lost, seven-and-twenty years ago. Ah, me!" and a sob checked the good woman's utterance.

Lucy was bending forward, deeply interested, while Renie's face was troubled.

"Tell me all about her, Mrs. Troost."

"Yes, I will, Miss Renie. It is time, in my opinion, that you knew; you are the last of the old stock. Somehow I never *can* remember Master Baby, bless his pretty face all the same. But the master would never have it named, and the Colonel, your father, Miss Renie, was just as bitter. I am not sure that I'd be telling you now, but for that bell, for I am disobeying orders direct. Anyway, since you have grown up what you have, I believe Sir Bevis would tell you himself, only that the subject has been buried so long. Well, Miss Renie, your aunt, Miss Clorinda, was as lovely a creature as human eye ever rested on, her two brothers just idolized her, and I scarcely know which was her favourite; she was the youngest, a great deal younger than your father. When my old master and mistress died, she took on dreadful, poor young thing, and I could hardly bear to wait on her, but Sir Bevis was so considerate, he made her almost forget, and took her about a great deal. She was not much over nineteen,

and the picture of an angel; Miss Addy sometimes reminds me of Miss Clorinda. But she never took kindly to strangers and gaiety, and used to say she liked no place so well as home. Well, they were very contented these three; Mr. Denis was a great deal away, but the time never seemed so long because Sir Bevis and Miss Clorinda were always talking of him just as if he was present. Your aunt had many offers, but they none of them could tempt her to leave Zeigleheath. But one day in September she went strolling and never came back. Oh! what an awful time that was. I thought my master would have gone mad; we never went to bed for nights. But she was never found, either dead or alive. And some days after one of the fishermen found a glove on the beach. That led to the belief that she had fallen off the cliffs, and her body drifted into some cave or got fixed between the rocks, which prevented it washing ashore."

By this time the tears were streaming down

Mrs. Troost's cheeks, and even Lucy's eyes looked dim.

"But you have not explained about the mysterious bell. What has that to do with the drowned lady?"

"I am coming to that, Miss Northwood. That bell belongs to one of the traditions of the Rudkin family. You should get your uncle, Miss Renie, to let you read the old family parchments. I have heard there are many curious things in them. But he is against anything of the sort, I know. However, there is the story of the bell, and it runs thus:—

"'Sir Wildbrand Rudkin's lady was very gentle and tender hearted, and she begged her husband to have a bell put in the tower, to warn strange ships off the rocks, and many and many a night did she pass ringing it. But she was not happy, and she either threw herself into the sea or Sir Wildbrand did; anyway, she met with a sudden death. With

her the bell disappeared, and was never seen again, and the story goes that the White Lady rises out of the sea and rings it to warn her family when any danger threatens them, as she stands on the eagles' cliff to warn the fishermen of a coming storm. That bell was heard seven-and-twenty years since, before Miss Clorinda was lost.'"

"Well, we heard it last night, my good Mrs. Troost, that is quite positive, and the sound came from Sir Wildbrand's tower. Is there no picture of my aunt? I should like to see her."

"Yes, there is a portrait of Miss Clorinda, Miss Renie, in her room, which has been shut up since she was lost, and I keep the key and open it only once in a way to clean it, but nothing is ever moved."

"Oh! Mrs. Troost, take us to see it," exclaimed Lucy, eagerly.

"Yes, I will; but not now. After tea is taken in if you two come here I'll be ready,

and the servants will be at supper in the hall, so the house will be quiet. But you must not let out for the world, young ladies, that I have told you."

"No, indeed, we won't; make yourself quite easy," said Lucy.

"Positively," began that voluble lady, as she leisurely attired herself before one glass, and Renie performed the like duty at another. "I regret that I have not the gift of writing, for I might turn this lost aunt of yours to some account; it is a perfect romance, my sweet Renie. What a pity you were not acquainted with these thrilling stories in the days at Hill Cottage. How we should have relished them."

"Yes, indeed, and pretty nearly terrified ourselves out of our wits at the same time. But I had no idea my family were such an exciting race. Addy and I never heard anything of it."

"Make haste, Lucy; there's the gong sounding. Don't mention last night's business."

The evening seemed awfully long, and they dared not go till the servants were at their evening meal, so they resolved, after taking a cup of tea, to indulge in a walk, and chose the west side. They could not have made a better selection—that still, lonely wood was a fitting place to watch God's darkness gathering. Everything was peaceful and silent. The birds were going to roost, and only now and then the sweet wild note of the thrush rippled through the trees, mournful even in its gladness. A soft wind moaned in the long grass, making the hare bells bow their graceful heads, as if in thankfulness for the approaching rest. Some degree of awe and solemnity must possess everyone while viewing such a scene; they cannot be unconscious of the near proximity to their Maker, when beholding His works; we can almost see the Divine Hands outstretched, and hear the cry—"Mine! mine!"

The two girls strolled on, each busy with her own thoughts, or softly talking. When

they did halt, a peculiar sound smote their ear; it was the click of a croquet ball. They had strayed to the boundary, and the Count was amusing himself with his favourite game, no doubt.

Lucy laughed.

"Suppose we take a peep at his serene majesty, Renie?"

"No, indeed; I would not flatter his vanity so much. I almost wonder how he makes himself content. He must surely feel dull."

"Not he; what with his zither and croquet, eating, sleeping, and drinking, he kills time easily enough, depend upon it."

"Well, one thing is self-evident; his mind must be at rest. Few men arrived at the Count's age can endure solitude. And now we had better make our way back; we sha'n't be any too soon, it is nearly dark."

Renie was correct; there was Mrs. Troost awaiting them, with a lamp, turned very low, in her hand.

"Now, young ladies, please step lightly," commanded the Goddess, descending like a ton weight on each step, as an example. "There's no one about; that's a blessing."

She led them through the corridor and down a gallery to the right, and stopped before a door near the middle. The lock turned rather stiffly, but yielded to Mrs. Troost's hand, and they passed in. The lamp was turned up, and the girls looked breathlessly round. The room was not furnished in such a heavy style as the rest of the house —it was modernized and prettily decorated; little cupids skipped about over the ceiling, and on the panels of the doors love birds and flowers were painted exquisitely. There were some things loose on the toilet table, just as their owner had left them, and on everything there was a coating of dust.

Mrs. Troost apologised and commenced blowing vigorously.

"You see, I cannot have a regular turn out,

because of the master, and the windows must be opened, so that some dust will settle. I see you're looking for the portrait, Miss Renie, so come this way. It used to hang in the gallery, along with the rest, but Sir Bevis had it moved here."

She entered a room to the right—a pretty boudoir, with a harp at one side and a pile of music, also a piano. Books garnished the table, along with a piece of fancy work, once a group of moss roses, but now scarcely distinguishable. It was horrible to think that they had been in their places seven-and-twenty years with never a hand to touch them, unless the spirit of their lost mistress tended them.

Lucy Northwood shivered visibly, and drew nearer to Renie.

"This way, Miss Renie," said Mrs. Troost, passing gingerly round the table. "This is your aunt, Miss Clorindea; it was taken when she was eighteen."

The worthy dame raised the lamp, and showed the picture of a sweet girl in a low dress with a fan in her hand. She was standing in such a listless manner and with such a pleading expression in her face, that, involuntarily, Renie exclaimed—

"Poor creature."

"You think she looks sad, Miss Renie?"

"Ah, yes, very sad; was she happy, Mrs. Troost?"

"I don't know, my dear; but I don't fancy she was quite, though she never told me. But you are sharp, Miss Renie; no one takes that expression for sadness, they all call it amiability."

"Yes," said Lucy, presently, "I do fancy there is a slight resemblance to Mrs. Howard in that face; they are both fair too."

"Both fair," echoed Mrs. Troost, "not at all like Miss Renie here, are they, Miss Lucy?"

Lucy laughed and pinched Renie.

"Not a scrap, I have seen no one like this brown creature yet; are you sure she belongs to you, Mrs. Troost?"

"Aye, aye, quite sure. But come now, these rooms are to my thinking damp, and you two will be getting chilled."

Lucy at once obeyed the command, but Renie turned to have one last look at the sweet eyes, so sad and mournful, and then they left the forsaken chambers.

CHAPTER XII.

It was a beautiful sunny morning, about eleven o'clock, that Renie and Lucy were returning from a good practise of duets in the drawing-room, and stopped for a second at the window in the corridor, facing Lady Rudkin's dressing-room. Distinctly came the pretty prattle of Rodney, as he drove horses round and round the nursery, and through the trees could be seen the silvery stream gushing on its way, and the old water wheel sending the foam dashing on each side. It was a pretty bit that, quite a cascade, and

close under the drooping boughs was a rustic bridge, over which some sheep were crossing.

"How lovely," ejaculated Lucy, feasting her town eyes, "I only wish mamma—"

Lucy's wish remained unspoken, for at that moment voices in angry dispute in the dressing-room became audible.

"Hold your tongue, woman, and don't lecture me; your day is past, and I won't stand it, I tell you."

The girls turned in astonishment—could *that* be my lady?

"Have a care!" replied another voice, harsh and disagreeable, "or you will take a step too far; you are too daring. *I'll* not let you risk—"

Here the voice sank again, and Lucy made a movement towards the west wing, followed by Renie, but barely had she done so before a heavy thud met their ears, followed by a suppressed scream, and the door was flung open and Lady Rudkin rushed out with a

white, scared face. Lucy was the first her eye rested upon.

"Ah, Miss Northwood, quick, call nurse; my maid, Shepperton, is in a fit."

"Fit!" exclaimed the plain-spoken Lucy, flinging the music on the floor, "I should not have supposed *her* subject to fits."

She did not call nurse as desired, but walked past Lady Rudkin into the room, perhaps she deemed it unnecessary, as nurse's head appeared at the nursery door that instant.

Shepperton's fit was a curious one, she lay partly on her back near the door, perfectly quiet, not moving a muscle. They all bent over her, my lady shaking like an aspen leaf and gasping—

"Ah, nurse, is she dead? is she dead?"

"Of course she's not dead, my lady; what should she be dead for? Miss Renie, will you hand me one of those jugs?"

Renie did as requested, and nurse, without

any more parley, coolly tossed the contents into Shepperton's face.

The ugly creature slowly moved her hands, and opening her eyes, sat up.

"Short fit," remarked Lucy to Renie.

"How do you feel, Mrs. Shepperton?" enquired nurse, setting the empty jug down.

"Quite well, nurse, that is to say, better. Did I startle you, my lady?" asked the considerate Shepperton, slowly gathering herself up, while a grin that seemed more of delight than anything else spread over her countenance.

The question was accompanied by an action perfectly natural, yet worthy of mention. One red hand was pressed to the left side of her head near the temple, and when she removed it, Lucy noticed a red dented mark. When Lucy raised her eyes, she encountered those of nurse, they had both been looking at the same thing.

"Yes, I should say you had startled my

lady," remarked nurse, regarding her as she stood white to the lips. "I did not know as you was subject to fits, Shepperton."

"Oh! I have been subject to the like of what you've seen for some years; haven't I, my lady?"

"Yes, Shepperton, yes," replied Lady Rudkin, nervously.

"Oh! it's a great pity; I advise you to go to bed for half-an-hour, or you might get another," and nurse promptly opened the door and let her out, a proceeding which Renie and Lucy were not slow to follow.

"Nurse!" called Lady Rudkin; "Nurse, stay a second. Oblige me by not mentioning to your fellow servants that Shepperton is subject to such seizures, they are so very rare; and I ought not to have got alarmed, and called out, but I don't fancy I am quite well to-day."

"Certainly not, my lady; but hadn't you better send for Doctor Owen? he'd set

you to rights soon, and this hot weather *is* trying."

Lady Rudkin smiled faintly.

"It is nothing of consequence, nurse; and will pass off with a good sleep; we women are but weak creatures."

This was followed by a dead attempt at the old rippling, girlish laugh, but it sounded odd enough just then, and ended abruptly in a catching sob. Nurse seemed rather puzzled, but, not having a suitable reply or a few words of respectful comfort at her tongue's end, she prudently withdrew, and left her to sob at her leisure.

"Well, who on earth would have thought it?" soliloquised Mary, wife of the late Jim Muggins, as she retraced her steps to the nursery. I never was so bewildered in all *my* days—Shepperton in a fit! A fine one for fits is my lady's maid," and Mary giggled loud.

A few hours later, when walking with

master baby in the park, she met Renie and Lucy.

"How is Shepperton, nurse?" asked Renie, eating a peach.

"She's very well, Miss Renie; I saw her going about as usual."

"I cannot help thinking it was a queer fit; there used to be some girls at school subject to fits, you remember, Lucy, and their's were always very different to that of Shepperton's. Don't you think so, Lucy?"

Lucy laughed, and glanced at nurse.

Rodney was playing under the trees and out of hearing.

"Renie, my dear girl," replied her friend, turning to her, "don't yon think it just possible that it was no fit at all? people may faint without kicking."

"But Lady Rudkin called it a fit, and said she was subject to them, Lucy."

"We say a good many things when we are frightened; don't we, nurse?"

"Yes, indeed, we do, Miss Northwood; and forget that folks have eyes and senses of their own."

The woman cast a glance of intelligence at Lucy, which that young lady did not consider wise to respond to.

No sooner was nurse away to her charge, than Renie exclaimed—

"Lucy, what is this about Shepperton? You seem very wide awake, you and nurse?"

"Do we? Well, supposing we sit down, and then I'll try to awaken you. The fact is this—I don't believe Shepperton, great horse, had either a fit or a faint; if she even had a fit it's been one of temper."

"Go on," said Renie, drawing faces, arms, and legs on the soft grass with her sun shade; "you'll have me curious presently."

"Well, and I also believe that we heard them quarrelling, and that said quarrel was brought to an abrupt termination by the

golden-haired angel knocking the male-cum-female down."

"Lucy!"

"Precisely, my dear Renie; your aunt either struck her with something, or hit her, and in falling she struck herself. Did you see the mark on her forehead? I did, and so did nurse. Shepperton was stunned, and Lady Rudkin was terrified, because she feared for the moment she was dead. How did that woman get here, Renie?"

"Lady Rudkin brought her, Lucy, so nurse told me, and she cordially hates her."

"Indeed! There is some understanding that dates later back than their time here; they are an interesting study. Nurse has got her eyes opened, Renie, and it wants very little persuasion to get her to open her mouth."

"Lucy, listen. When first I came here both Mrs. Troost and nurse told me they feared we were only at the beginning of a very bad business. They neither of them

like Lady Rudkin. They seem to think there's something strange about her, and Norman thinks so too."

"And what is your opinion?"

"I don't know, Lucy. I have seen less of my uncle's wife than anyone would suppose, because I perceived we should not agree if too much together, and up in the west wing I hear very little of what passes. Yet I cannot say I am comfortable. I always feel expecting something."

"Well, it is a curious thing that so many of us should be impressed with the same feeling; and I don't mind confessing to you, Renie, that from the very first I was struck with something peculiar about your aunt."

After Renie had seen the portrait of her Aunt Clorinda, she, at Lucy's suggestion, attempted to copy it from memory, and succeeded admirably. It was with the greatest difficulty that Renie prevented it going to Mr. Twinkleton, and even then had to pro-

mise Lucy that if there was not a better it should go next time. Mr. Twinkleton was now a constant purchaser, and Renie was in receipt of a moderate income, which would, of course, cease the moment she stopped work. Lucy sometimes asked, "Renie, aren't you tired?"

"No, Lucy, I am ambitious, and moreover I love it. I don't believe I could stop now; I should feel lost."

And it was the truth. The young girl, driven back upon herself, had twined her energies and affection round one thing—Art, and having embraced it, it had become her guide, her aim in life. On to the pieces of blank paper she poured her heart's thoughts, and, as the objects grew, they became her friends, her world, without which God's earth would have seemed very empty and dreary.

CHAPTER XIII.

About this time Sir Bevis took it into his head to have his own and Lady Rudkin's portraits painted, also the boy's, and some weeks after the above announcement, during which time he had been looking out for a clever artist, he told them one morning, after reading his letters, that he had succeeded in procuring a genius, who would arrive the Wednesday following and start operations.

"Who is he, Sir Bevis?" enquired Lady Rudkin.

"Well, my dear, he is a Spaniard, I

believe; at least so Wigton tells me, and very clever. He has painted several pictures for them, and they speak highly of them. His name is Rufus Sebastain."

"What a pretty name," said his wife, sweetly. "I hope he will be good looking. I don't care for plain people."

"Then whatever induces you to retain that maid of yours, my love? I never saw an uglier woman."

Lady Rudkin changed colour slightly.

"That is a weakness of mine. I admire Shepperton for her good qualities, not her beauty; and I could not send her away."

The last phrase sounded to Renie and Lucy like a regret. But her husband, doating old fool! saw only the amiability of his wife, and actually commended her goodness of heart in keeping what in all probability other people would not have harboured.

A smile rose to Lucy's lips, and she wondered how long this state of bliss would last.

When the Wednesday morning arrived, the two girls commenced to speculate on the appearance of Rufus Sebastain, the rising artist.

"Lucy," said Renie, laying down the brush with which she was putting in a bit of summer sky, "I am very glad this young man is coming; I shall do my best to make friends with him, because, perhaps, he may be useful to me; at any rate he can teach me a great deal. It is queer how things come round. When I was struggling so hard to improve, I used to wish for help so much, and now, when I am almost independent, it comes."

"Yes it is. I thought, when Sir Bevis spoke of getting an artist, how little he guessed he had one close to him. I almost wished you to offer your services, Renie; the money would be so useful to you, dear."

"Very; but I prefer keeping quiet. I don't approve of clinging to and confiding in one's family."

"No, I know you don't. I wonder how my patience is to last out till dinner time. I think we had best get ourselves up artistically; at any rate, you had—first impressions go a long way."

"That's true enough; but I want his friendship, not his admiration or love; so beyond not wearing pink and blue, I shall not trouble myself."

The large drawing-room was deserted; so thought the girls on entering it some time before dinner. The windows were opened wide, and the delicious scent of the flowers floated in. There was something delightfully cool and shady in that apartment, with its summer covering of chintz, almost as alluring as the walk by the river side, where the trees, meeting overhead in friendly intercourse, invited the birds to seek shelter. That walk was an attraction; it stretched a mile or more in extent, and then let you out into a green lane. Once upon a time there had been a

grand waterfall, but now that was partly done away with. In the widest portion of the stream was an island, which you reached by means of a bridge. On the far side a wooden seat, and, resting there, you had a view of the sloping meadows, with the lazy cows whisking their tails to keep off the flies, while the river rippled and gushed at your feet. Those meadows, too, were a sort of promenade in the cool of the evening ; the gentlemen staying in the village to fish came down to try and trap the wily trout, and, standing up to their knees in the stream, called out nonsense and messages to each other, or carried on a sly flirtation with some girls on the opposite side. I wonder if any of the frequenters of the river side ever remember those evenings ? I wonder if in the mysterious lull of a summer's night their souls at the very gates of hell are not stayed, and the sweet scene with its entrancing calm, as if brushed by angel's wings, does not float

through their dimmed brains ? if there is not one effort made to recall that time, if there is not one sigh heaved as they recollect what was and what is ? I should like them to remember ; and yet I could wish to spare them, for out of the joy comes keen sorrow.

" Well," began Miss Lucy, placing herself on a couch near a window, " the curiosity is not down. My dear, I am prepared to see a second edition of the ' affrighted Sailor,' a wild looking creature with long, uncombed locks flying down his back; in fact, all hair and teeth like a Scotch terrier, with his clothes tucked in, showing ever so much of his neck, which, by the way, I hope may be clean. Those genuises always require everything very loose, I suppose because their inspiration causes them to swell to such a size at times, that without that precaution was taken they might burst, and the buttons go pop, pop, which, I should say, would be very embarrassing, eh, Renie ? Do you recollect

Ludderdale Carpenie and *his* music? That class where we were all fools, and him the biggest. 'Top of the class we feel so grand, in the middle we form a band, but down below were forced to stand,' the latter phrase referring principally to Amelia, who, from time to time, kept muttering under her breath—'Catch a weasel asleep.' And then that—'Now top lady sing out,' followed by Kate, all of a shiver and shake, twittering —'White sand and gray sand.' It is a miracle how I ever suppressed my mirth; I was in one convulsion from the time I went in to the time I came out. And I dared not answer a question many a time, for I knew if I opened my lips I should laugh. Oh! that 'Hill Cottage;' if my inside's injured, I lay the blame at it's door, remember. Renie, whatever's to do? You look like a boiled cod."

Lucy might well ask, for Renie was gazing in a petrefied manner through a mirror at something half in and half out of a window, with the clematis touching its head. Such a

nice something too; so fresh and sweet looking, with a girlish smile playing round the pouting mouth. A perfect crop of chesnut hair, half waves, half curls, and such a couple of dreamy, innocent blue eyes. The collar was thrown open and back, displaying a well-shaped throat of marvellous whiteness. In place of a white tie was a knot of cherry coloured satin; the dress clothes of fine cloth fitted charmingly on the tall, supple figure. It was a wonder the angels did not steal him when a child to be a cherub. Don't imagine that the object I have described was all this time in the window. Nothing of the sort; he was standing close to the girls, watching their faces of astonishment, and making an ill attempt, if any, to conceal his amusement. Renie bowed, and held out her hand.

"Mr. Sebastain, I presume?"

"Yes, I am Rufus Sebastain, and you are—?"

"Renie Rudkin; this is Miss Northwood, my friend."

The smile deepened into a broad grin as he bowed to Lucy, who had gathered herself up in haste.

It was no use, in a second they were all laughing heartily, and Lucy, recovering first, said—

"And so you heard my opinion of you, Mr. Sebastain? Well, I never expected anything like what you are, did you, Renie?"

"No," replied he, laughing and showing two rows of white teeth, "you expected all hair and teeth. But do I suit your ladyship?"

He shook back the long mane and flashed a proud glance at the almost extinguished Lucy.

"Perfectly, and I hope you are not angry at my rudeness; not that it distresses me very much either way. It serves you right for listening. You know listeners never hear any good of themselves."

"But I did not hear any bad, Miss North-

wood, only some most severe cuts, which I shall try my best not to merit. Instead of regretting it, I regard it as a slice of prime fortune, for it will save all that dancing attendance and foolery that some young ladies deem necessary before they make friends with one. It sickens me, and they might roll their eyes for ever before I'd take to rolling mine. I hope I'm going to paint you two. Now, if we could only get up that luckless Ludderdale Carpenie's class; where's he to be seen?"

"Oh no, Mr. Sebastain, don't mention that, because the choice specimen is in the flesh, cutting a great dash, and you are not to paint my portrait. I am too poor to pay you, unless it be with love."

"The most acceptable thing you could offer a poor friendless devil like me. You should have thought before you spoke, Miss Northwood. Who knows but what I may hold you to your bargain?"

"I am not afraid; but we are astonishing Renie."

"Rather. No! our faces are not well enough formed to be preserved; it is my new aunt, uncle, and the child you are to try your hand at. I don't know where they've made your studio, I am sure. Here's uncle."

"Then I'd better put the settee between us, or the old gentleman may be scared."

With that he twisted himself round and instantly stood, the picture of a gentleman, a respectful distance from the young ladies.

In came Sir Bevis with his stately measured tread, his white head slightly on one side.

"Well, my dears. Ah, Mr. Sebastain, it just occurred to me how you would manage, so I left Lady Rudkin and hurried down. But you have struck up an acquaintance, I suppose."

"Oh yes, Miss Rudkin took me in hand," and he laughed.

"Ah, my dear Renie is equal to all emer-

gencies; she has no prudish notions. How do you define etiquette, Renie?"

"It is not worth a definition, uncle. I don't believe there is any rule for it, beyond doing and saying what is most natural in an unstudied manner, and paying due respect to everyone's feelings."

"Perfectly correct, Miss Rudkin; that is the true stand for a lady to take. I only wish some of your ideas could be blown into other people's heads, it would render it far more agreeable to outsiders. Society appears to me to be all in cliques, heads, like beasts at a cattle show. Now a little amalgamation would be both beneficial and refreshing, if you could only get the people to understand the object and treat it properly. I just hate any influential grandees to ask me to their houses. I don't mind the criticism, and inspection through eye-glasses, but I feel so inclined to turn my back upon them in the middle of the performance. The

host very kindly indicates who and what you are in a polite whisper, and they hum and haw and blow, and regard you as if you were the celebrated leopard with nineteen spots on his back. On the other hand, if the patroness good naturedly takes you under her wing and makes a pet of you, you are, according to my idea, immediately reduced to the level of a 'King Charles.' So that it is questionable which way is the best for an outsider to effect an entrance into society, as it is in this age. Those who have a string of ancestors at the tip of their tongue as long as one's arm, get a free pass, but anyone shrouded in obscurity may leave their exhausted remains on the door-step, to be swept off by the porter."

This speech had been delivered in a cold, hard tone, immersed in bitterness, and two red spots burnt on each cheek. Sir Bevis regarded him in a fatherly, kind manner.

The young man had not a little astonished the old one; but he quickly saw it was not hearsay, but experience, that prompted the proud fellow to speak. The Baronet may have had the desire to say something kind, but he could not make up his mind what. Meanwhile Renie moved nearer to Rufus Sebastain, and putting her hand on his sleeve in a friendly, sisterly way, said in a low tone—

"May there not be such a thing as an exaggerated grievance, Mr. Sebastain? Don't you think you are over sensitive? That comes of being too highly bred. You should be like me, more of a plebeian, then you would not feel half the slights and pushes. I fancy sometimes I am too bold?"

He gazed at her with a countenance of surprise and incredulity, not unmingled with pity. Some of the dimness had returned to the splendid eyes, and now the soft, pale lids dropped over them as if they were tired, and

in a voice that trembled, he said, too low for any ears but hers—

"God bless you, Miss Rudkin, for your ready sympathy; the touch of your hand does me good. My life has been so void of all gentleness. The match-seller in the street has had more kisses and caresses than I; it is a wonder I am not a brute. But you know nothing of such things; I forgot to whom I was speaking."

"There now, don't get startled at nothing, and shy like a timid pony. I am no one of consequence; I am poor, and struggling, and, what is worse, struggling in the dark, for I dare not let it be known, which cripples me a good deal. I can trust you."

"Yes, indeed, you may; what a queer girl you are!"

The entrance of Lady Rudkin in pale pink stopped all further conversation; the old Baronet went through the introducing with evident satisfaction, and looked not a little

proud of his lovely wife. A few polite phrases, and my lady took her stand near her husband and Lucy, all three waiting the call to dinner. Renie glanced up at Rufus Sebastain; she desired to ascertain, if possible, what sort of an impression the peerless beauty of Lady Rudkin had made upon him. He was studying her with the eye of a judge, and, catching Renie's upturned ones, and, reading their meaning, he replied—

"Beautiful! But if I painted her my own way, it would be as one of the characters in 'Hamlet;' I should make her 'Queen.'"

"*Mon Dieu!*" ejaculated Renie, under her breath.

"We trust each other, you see, Miss Rudkin; I cannot go far astray in speaking to you."

Renie could scarcely believe her ears, and then before another word could be uttered she found herself going in to dinner, though she did not feel much inclined for any. Rufus

Sebastain proved an entertaining, agreeable companion, with a great deal of knowledge in his head. He quickly perceived that the Rudkins were too sound-minded to treat him otherwise than as an honoured guest, and took every possible care not to be always reminding him that he was hired to paint my lady's picture. With the dessert came master baby, chuckling and laughing in great glee. His father put him to sit on the table, and pinched one dappled leg.

"What do you think of this lad, Mr. Sebastain?"

Mr. Sebastain was regarding the boy with an astonished gaze, and presently, turning to Sir Bevis, said—

"You have had as faithful a portrait taken of that child as you will ever get, Sir Bevis; I doubt if there could be a better."

It was now Sir Bevis's turn to be surprised, and Lady Rudkin laughed merrily.

"Dear me! Mr. Sebastain, whatever are

you saying? Rodney has never had his likeness taken, and that's what makes us desire it—he is such a bonny little fellow."

"Why, Lady Rudkin, I saw it! The portrait of that child is now in the Academy; it is called 'My Pet,' and one of the best there, allowed by judges."

Renie felt her face deepening in tone, and Lucy, who sat next the positive artist, fairly tittered with delight. But Renie's face spoke volumes, and Lucy felt compelled to hasten to the rescue before it was too late. What could she do? Touch his foot, and then give him a look of reprimand. No sooner thought than done. Now, had Rufus Sebastain been a donkey, all would have been up, but he was not. He did not suddenly turn in the direction of the poke, but looked to ascertain the cause of the telegraph before answering it. He looked at Renie, and read there that he must discover he was mistaken. A smile played round the pleasant lips, and before

Sir Bevis or his wife could respond to the intelligence that the likeness of the young heir was disported on the walls of the Academy, he turned, and, bowing, said—

"Pardon my rudeness, Lady Rudkin, but I never was so deceived before; I felt positive I beheld the original of that charming little picture. But at the same time I do not think you can do better than buy it; it is wonderfully like that child."

"That child" was staring at the speaker with round eyes, and his mother called him fondly.

"Rodney, my precious, do you hear what Mr. Sebastain says? Come to mamma, and be kissed."

The boy slid along the polished table into his mamma's lap, and commenced a game at "bo-peep" with his long curls.

"Children are so much alike, Mr. Sebastain, at this age," continued Lady Rudkin, "that one may be easily deceived."

Rodney was busily engaged boring a hole,

with one chubby finger, in his mamma's white neck. Sir Bevis looked first on one side and then the other.

"What is that boy doing, mamma?"

"I don't know," replied his wife, laughing.

"Rodney, what are you about?" called his father.

"Kill ze pig, pa," responded the baby butcher, without turning his sunny head.

There was a general laugh, which prompted master baby to further exploits, for wheeling round suddenly he delivered the following choice sentiment, with his button of a mouth all in a pucker :—

"Pigs might f'y, but they're wery unlikely birds."

Rufus Sebastain laughed loud.

"You are all in the pig line, little man. He is a pretty plaything."

"Ah, that's your idea of children, is it? Plaything! you'll find your mistake some day," and the old man sighed.

The artist smiled an apology to Lady Rudkin, and said—

"I don't know how to estimate domestic happiness of any sort, or love, or gifts; I have never had a home all my life. I think if anyone took the trouble to care for me, I should not know what return to make."

This was said so sadly; it cut Renie to see a great man so lonely.

"You are, I believe, a Spaniard, are you not, Mr. Sebastain? But I don't think you can be; Wigton must have been thinking of someone else."

"No; he was thinking of me when he wrote to you, Sir Bevis. I suppose I am a Spaniard, though I don't look the sort to belong to that country; but I must have been born somewhere, and Spain suits my purpose as well as anywhere else."

Lady Rudkin looked askance for more, but he did not seem disposed to tell his history, and there it ended.

With tea came Sir Bevis and Rufus Sebastain, and my lady roused up. It was quite cool now, and the artist asked to be shown the gardens; there was still enough light for that.

"Ah! yes; here, my dears, take Mr. Sebastain out. Remember I leave him in your hands, Renie; you must take him about and amuse him. My legs are not so nimble as they had used to be. Lucy, what are you doing?"

"Teaching Lady Rudkin how to tat, Sir Bevis. Go along, Renie; I will follow presently."

The two accordingly went, and Lucy's "presently" expanded into a long time. Her pupil was terribly dull and worrying; but Lucy considered it best to forego the ramble, and instruct the pretty doll, for it pleased Sir Bevis.

CHAPTER XIV.

"Now take me to a nice shady place, Miss Rudkin," said Sebastain; "I like trees better than flowers any day. Remember I am your charge, so I shall expect you to see to me constantly."

"Very well, I'll do my best to take care of you. I like the walk by the river side; so suppose we go?"

"By all means."

Arrived there, they seated themselves on a rustic seat under a fine lime, and the artist gazed for several seconds on the lovely scene.

It looked just enchanting. The moon was out and danced on the water, while on the island the moor-hens and water fowls were making their peculiar cry. All round were the meadows and woods, silvered by the moonlight, and down the stream could be heard distinctly the splash of the water mill. Ah! summer night, so far away, why could you not stay? Why need the giant hand Despair have gripped any soul? Why could not their breath have passed with the gentle wind that breathed through the grass, and the last sound in their ears have been the burr of the water wheel? If the pale light of day could only have shown one less on earth and one more in heaven, surely there would have been great rejoicing in that city that hath no need of the sun neither of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God doth lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.

"How lovely it is here," said Rufus Sebastain, drawing a long breath at last, and turn-

ing to Renie. "And now I want you to tell me something. Are not you the artist that painted 'My Pet'?"

"Yes, I am. I had better plead guilty, Mr. Sebastain, and throw myself on your mercy. I did do it. I gain a little by my pictures, and it is a great help to me, because my patrimony is very small, and can never increase. But none of my family know of it, and I ask you to keep my secret?"

"Yes, depend upon it I will. But I almost took my oath to your aunt, because there is no mistaking the child; you have made a decided hit. Miss Northwood's dig was not a second too soon; it is a happy thing I have no corns, else I should have howled, for I do assure you she was so intent upon screening you that she quite forgot to be gentle. I have still doubts as to the condition of my toe. But come, tell me, how did you get it into the Academy?"

"I never got it in at all; I did not know it

was there. I send my pictures to a rich old gentleman, named Twinkleton, a friend of the Northwoods; and he buys them, or sells them to his friends, and remits me the money. I suppose he must have put it there."

"Yes, no doubt, seeing its beauty. But it is a pity you don't tell your uncle, because he will never get so good a likeness; it is not one in twenty that gets it so exact, and you have worked it so prettily."

Thus they talked; he asked her all about her struggling and trying, and the girl told the simple story without any attributes. It needed none, and so thought Rufus Sebastain, as he looked, leaning his cheek on his hand, at her serious face. She seemed so weak, and yet so strong; she had battled it out alone, while many a man would have sunk under it; and then she was satisfied, out of her very innocence, with what she had made, and determined to continue her efforts in the same quiet, unobtrusive way. Fame

mattered not to her; she did not care if the great city rang again with her praises, the cry would not reach her, if only she made sufficient to supply her several wants, she valued not the *éclat*. The man by her side marvelled when he thought of the heart-aches and headaches over things not half so worthy. Yet here was this girl sleeping placidly, and going contentedly about, quite ignorant that "Miss Dorothy" was becoming of value in the market.

"Do you know you have every right to be conceited, Miss Rudkin?"

"Have I? I certainly don't recognise it."

"No, that is the way with you women; you are so saintly, at least some, that you don't care for feathers in your caps. Now half the men love sound, nay, almost live on it, till the delusion becomes a reality in their dazzled brains. Women are so enduring, so happy with a little, they are a lesson to us men."

"I daresay you are ambitious, Mr. Sebastain; and like to appear well in the world's eye?"

"Yes, Miss Rudkin, I do; consequently I never save a shilling; it all goes in keeping up appearances, and that's a fact. I have only three pounds, in all the world, at this present moment; I don't seem to mind telling you, though I believe I should go mad if I thought the world knew it. They all know I am poor; we young artists always are, but they little imagine what a close shave it is at times."

Renie eyed him pityingly.

"Why are you not more resolute, and save your money? You would not be less a gentleman, in the true sense of the term, for a little privation and pinching. What does your mother say to you, Mr. Sebastain? How does she advise you?"

"Oh! Miss Rudkin, that is my drawback. I think—I think that is the blast of my life

—I have no mother. No one to love me; no one to lead me. I am at the beck and call of every vice and temptation. I am a waif, and have been driven all my life, and shall be, I suppose, till I die. I have only one redeeming quality, and that is pride. It is my only friend, my safeguard; without it I, most probably, should be a vagabond, for I have had no care, no example. But it has prevented me doing things many a time; and I love it as my life. My one idea is to be a great man; to rank high, and be rich; then I think I can rest and seek the right path, if there is such a thing, for I have been in the wrong all my life."

"Don't wait till you are rich, Mr. Sebastain; commence now, at once; remember God does not allow stipulations."

"Doesn't He? Well, listen Miss Rudkin, I have got a strange fancy in my head to tell you my history. I ought, perhaps, to have satisfied Lady Rudkin's curiosity at dinner,

but I have never told a living soul; I shrink from it. But I feel as if you were not strange to me, as if we had met before, and I should like to tell you."

"And do you know I have been wishing to hear it; only I did not like asking you, so you see the feeling is mutual."

"Is it? Then I will commence. This is such a nice place to tell it in, because there are no gay sights or sounds, everything is hushed, like my life.

"I am now somewhere about five or six and twenty. I am not certain which. My memory carries me back a long way—to the days before I understood the meaning of words or could speak. But a few things I saw I partly remember. The first objects I noticed were trees, leaves, and birds. All was green, and I seemed to have awakened in the woods. I have a recollection of the sun, and lying on the grass, and with that recollection comes the faint outline of a face—

a woman's—who smiled at me through the trees. I often see that face in my dreams now, and it is always peeping between the boughs above me. That portion seems a mist. I cannot tell the name of the place or of anyone, but I just remember, the scene as I have told you. The next view is totally different. My eyes opened on four walls, a bed, and various images on the stones. I am now in a monastery in Spain; the monks whip me and make me learn, and I get black bread and fruits to eat. I have to say long prayers, that I don't understand, on my knees on the cold stones, to the hideous figure of a woman in marble, without any eyes. I have to confess my sins, and every time go without my food or do a double lesson. But I may as well skip all that; it was a horrid life, but I will give them (devils though they were) credit for one thing. They knocked something into me. From a child I always could make pictures, and got punished very

often for it too. It was a wonder I did not hate the sight of a brush or pencil. Well, one day in spring they called me to them, and gave me a valise and a sum of money, and told me I must go and work for myself. I was well educated, and I must turn it to account, for that was all I would ever get. I did not feel sorry to be set at liberty. Lads of sixteen don't care very much for the future at that age, and I got dreadfully impatient, while the Abbot said a benediction over my head. But as soon as it was finished I dashed out, the heavy door was barred after me, and I was an outcast. It did not trouble me much at first; I had money, the last that had been paid for me. I had only a name—Rufus Sebastain—no father, no mother, no friends, few clothes, and about five pounds in Spanish coin. On that I was to live as long as it would last, and afterwards starve, or thieve or beg.

"For the first few days I rather enjoyed my freedom, but at the end of that time I

began to consider what I should do. First and foremost, not go back to the monastery—I would have died sooner than do that. Secondly, my money would not last for ever, so I must work. Thirdly, what at? I thought everything over, but I only favoured one thing—I would be an artist, and I jumped up and commenced trudging anew down the long, dry road. About eight at night I arrived, footsore and weary, at a great city, and upon asking the name I was told Madrid. I had no idea where I had come from. I had travelled miles and miles, sometimes on mules or in carts, but oftener on foot. It was a fortnight since they had turned me out of the monastery, and I had bought food as I could, sometimes getting none. I sat down under a large building, and cried as if my boyish heart would break. I felt lonely for the first time. In the country, I had no one else to remind me of my forlorn position; but here, in this

city, all had homes; I had none. Don't despise me for my weakness, Miss Rudkin; remember I was little better than a child, for most of my sixteen years had been dragged out within the walls of a secluded monastery. But while I wept, a woman came by, leading a child by the hand; it was crying, no doubt sleepy. She was comforting it with kind words, and encouraging it, for she could not take it up, her other hand being required to steady a pitcher on her head. As I listened to the tender, hopeful words, my own destitution almost overwhelmed me, and I cried aloud. The woman turned and addressed me in Spanish, and asked my sorrow; I told her, for her motherly face won my heart.

"As she listened, her black eyes filled with tears, and she squeezed the now silent child more closely to her side. She then bade me follow her to her own house, hard by, and I lodged there for long. That poor Spanish woman was the first creature that had ever

spoken a kind word to me, Miss Rudkin, and I pray for her every night of my life, and if the prayers of a sinner are any good, she will be at peace in the next world."

He did not say anything for a second, and Renie fancied she saw something glitter on the long lashes. Presently he resumed his narrative.

"Now, my desire was to get something to do, and I traversed miles, in search of work; but none of the artists would take me to assist them. They did not want a lad; apprentices were to be had for nothing. My spirit almost died within me, as night after night I returned to my bed, and was no nearer to my object. But the poor woman, my angel, cheered me on, and made me begin my quest each morning afresh. At last I found a shop, down a back alley, worse than the lowest of your pawnshops in London, kept by an old picture dealer, a man who could any day have passed for his satanic

majesty. The life I led with that old demon makes my blood curdle now.

"Oaths and the most foul words were his language, and I have had him swear at me and tear his hair out by handfuls, like a raving maniac, till he has fallen down in a convulsion on the dirty floor. He soon discovered my ability, and my life was as bad, if not worse, than a slave's. He paid me just enough to live on, and keep body and soul together. He made me paint pictures, which he sold, old Judas! and laughed and chuckled over the gold while I was well nigh starving. But I dared not quarrel with him, for fear I got turned into the streets again, and besides, I was learning—learning well. He was a capital master, though an unmerciful one, and my ambition was great, Miss Rudkin. Three years and more I stopped with him, and one day a noted artist, an Englishman, came to the shop to buy something, and saw some of my pictures.

"He asked my master about me, and I suppose the answer was satisfactory, for I agreed to go with him, and I was actually bought, for he paid the old demon money down for me.

"This, my third life, was better, slightly, than its predecessors. My master was travelling to improve himself; he was a rich man, not that he had made the money, but he had inherited some. So he bought me a bargain, and made plenty out of me. I was, however, better dressed, lodged, and fed, and had pocket-money, so I thought myself favoured. We went all over Italy, and stopped nearly two years in Rome. I got on well, and my master petted me greatly, and would not let me out of his sight. I thought him the best, the kindest man that ever lived, but I all at once found my mistake out. I was a fool, a dolt, a cat's-paw in the hands of this rich mean English-

man. What do you think he was doing, Miss Rudkin? putting *his* name to *my* pictures. Yes, I, the poor lad out of the monastery, painted the pictures that made that scoundrel famous. I saw one in the dining-room of one of the present members of Parliament not a month since. It is the picture of a poor tramp asleep under a hay rick, and he is dreaming. There is an angel hovering over the poor fellow, and to that angel I gave the face I first remember, the one I see in my dreams. I often wonder which is burning the most, my first or second master. After I left the cheat, I worked and roamed about by myself for years. I have travelled a great deal, and for fourteen months I have been in London, working for Wigton and myself. Now you know my history; how I have been beaten, half starved, insulted, and wronged; how I have lived alone, without help, without love, with no one to show me

right from wrong, no parents and next to no name. Whether Sebastain *is* my name really, or one the monks gave me, I cannot tell, but I keep it for want of a better. And now, Miss Rudkin, you have heard my true story (but only for your ears), now tell me what you think of me—am I a fair specimen of a homeless, friendless vagabond ?"

Renie had listened attentively to the history, and she wondered to see him the gentleman he was after such a life, without any example to guide him; for that he *was* a gentleman there was no questioning, every movement bespoke it. He might have lived from his cradle in the midst of peace and plenty; his hands bore no trace of toil, and it was hard, while looking at him, to remember that he had slaved amid great misery from the age of sixteen, and made himself what he was. How was it he had escaped, when

the sons of *gentlemen* sometimes sink to the depths of vice and degradation ?

But he was waiting for her to speak, with the breeze playing with his long hair ; perhaps he saw the reflection of his boy life on the river, for his face wore such a dejected, sorrowful look. Renie touched him.

" Mr. Sebastain, what are you thinking about ?"

" Nothing very pleasant, Miss Rudkin ; but alas ! misery never forgets her companions, though they would forget her, and returns to them, though invisible to others, when least desired."

" Now I guess what you are thinking of, and let me tell you ; you see with crooked eyes. You want to know what I think of you; whether you are a fair specimen of— what shall I call it ?—vagabondizing ? Now listen to my opinion. The story you have told me is the last I should ever have thought

belonged to you; there is not a single trace of the waif or vagabond about you. You are essentially a gentleman; from your appearance one would suppose you to have been nursed all your life on the lap of luxury. But you know differently, and the misery and hardship of your life are like a nightmare, haunting you even in the sunlight; and you imagine yourself stamped, blasted, because you have not a cavalcade of respectable relations to call round you. You make a great mistake—you are better without them. No one would be good enough to belong to you; you are a wonder, a hero as it is. But had you been the son of a nobleman, you would have only been a natural result, not one whit out of the common, and I for one should never have thought twice about you. You need not feel ashamed of your past life, it is a credit to you. If any fools are disposed to sneer at it, you may treat them with con-

tempt, for you can say, 'Behold the result!' We feel no surprise at seeing flowers in a garden, but we *should* be amazed to find a camelia in a ditch. You deserve to be knighted, Mr. Sebastain!"

"Miss Rudkin, you take my breath away; and that is your opinion? Well, I have always felt oppresssed, and as if everyone deemed me an adventurer, and not to be trusted; it has made me bitter at times. But I don't think I shall care so much now, after your cheering words; but do you know you are not like the generality. You don't follow the marked road."

"No, I daresay not, we are all prone to follow the strongest party, especially if of the world, and mix in it. But I don't; I shall never enter society. All I want from the world is a living, and to get that I need not offer my ideas. But I feel safer where the ground is firmest and highest, so I just keep

to it. The beaten road seems to me to be all dust, not half the people see where they are going to. Mr. Sebastain, do you know you are covered with dust, dust from the shoes of great people ?"

"Oh! Miss Rudkin!"

"Yes, but you are; and if I were you I'd brush it off. You need not do exactly what other people do, unless you want to be lost in the crowd, and then I should like to know who'll take the trouble to find you? Cease that nonsense of 'keeping up appearance,' it's the greatest snare out, it nets thousands, and they go following the gander all their lives, like a flock of geese. If you are the attraction yourself, you will have plenty of visitors, no matter whether your boots are square or round-toed, whether you ride in a cab or a carriage."

"True; but you want some courage to face the world the contrary way; it is like run-

ning against the wind, you get out of breath. Yet I know what you say is correct, and I shall never be independent as long as I keep up appearance, but it is so difficult to get an unpolished unset gem; however rare, it is valued at nothing in their eyes without the setting; they like the gleam and glitter of the gold. Oh! me; I am mortally weak, and I know it is my failing, but I will try to think less of sound. As I just now told you, pride has kept me from falling, but for that I verily believe I should have been hanged or transported before now, I have been so tossed about. I am like a ship, too free; I want ballast."

Renie did not answer, she looked at the trees, reflected by the moon down the stream.

"What are you thinking of, Miss Rudkin? Your brows are knit," and he gazed into her face.

"I daresay," replied the girl, clearing them,

but not smiling. "I was just thinking of our two characters; you are too daring and easily led; I am too cautious and stubborn. What a pity we cannot divide them."

"Yes, it *is* a pity. But aren't you cold? I see someone coming under the trees yonder; it is Miss Northwood, I suppose."

CHAPTER XV.

"FOUND at last," exclaimed Lucy, stopping before them. "What have you two been talking about? I should like to know. Renie looks as if she had quite made up her mind about something. Mr. Sebastain, you don't know what a determined girl this is?"

"Yes I do, Miss Northwood. Miss Rudkin is true to her purpose, and I only wish I could be like her. But do sit down."

"Thanks; since you are so kind I will. I

need not inquire whether you are in possession of Renie's secret. You could not have sat here in this moonlight without betraying some confidence. Nothing like moonlight for secrets to come out. You must have been telling them, if you have not been making love, which I don't think probable, Renie not being a soapy young lady."

Rufus Sebastain laughed outright, and Renie joined them.

"Never mind, Lucy, there's no harm done, or offence given; we have not been doing spoons, we have been talking like two sages, and Mr. Sabastain does know my secret."

"That reminds me, Miss Rudkin; I want to examine your studio some time; the sooner the better, as far as I am concerned."

"Well, I have no objection; but you will not, I fear, get repaid for the trouble. My studio is in the west wing, a long way from your rooms; but ask your way from one of the

servants or Rodney; he is always scampering about by the nursery door, and he will gladly conduct you to Aunt Renie's sitting-room, for it is not supposed to merit any other title. And now, supposing we take a turn, we have sat so long."

The three continued to saunter by the river till nearly bed time, and they might have known each other years, they were so free and easy. They had no scruples; Renie and Lucy were not afraid of him supposing them in love with him, and he saw it. And, for another reason, he plainly perceived they were not impressionable, designing girls; so he threw off all restraint, and chatted freely about unusual topics. Half the men are frightened out of being candid and friendly by the traps young ladies so openly set for them, and to protect themselves, poor beset wretches! they put out as many spikes as a hedgehog. A girl is to be pitied if she is left

to entertain one of these seasoned mortals for any length of time. If she is frank and chatty, and ventures to give her opinion and ask his about any sensible subject, not general in small talk, he will eye her in alarm and astonishment, and cast frequent glances towards the door, doubtless conjecturing that the termination to such confidential free conversation will be an offer. Or that she will faint, and when mamma tenderly asks the cause of her darling's agitation say Mr. So-and-So has proposed to her. But there are girls who don't imagine every gentleman they meet is in love with them, and it simply disgusts them to see men so careful and guarded, and evidently afraid of being hooked against their inclination.

Rufus Sebastain could not at first comprehend what made these two girls so pleasant and entertaining; he felt he enjoyed their society, and did not desire to be relieved of

them, as he had often done while talking to a beautiful creature who had been presented at the last drawing-room.

There were no awkward pauses in the conversation and no studied movements, no pensive downcast eyes or pleading upturned ones. If he had said anything foolish, they would have laughed at him, or told him of it; and if he had ventured to relate the sayings of his great friend Sir George Crofton, they would have sneered and left him. But he was not a man of that sort, and then they all met on equal ground.

When Renie stopped at the end window, and said—

"Now we are going in, but you will doubtless smoke a while yet?"

He made no attempt to conceal his disappointment, but replied—

"I am very sorry to lose you, I have not had such a refreshing jolly talk for years, but I am coming in too!"

"Well, the truth is, Renie and I are not on pins with you, you are the right sort—there is, to use a slang term, no 'humbug' about you."

"Many thanks, Miss Northwood; you could not have paid me a greater compliment, or pleased me more."

It was not only the girls who liked the poor struggling artist, but Sir Bevis, and indeed everyone. Norman Howard engaged him to paint two or three pictures for him, so that altogether Christmas Day might see him at Moordart. There was a great deal of joking done by Norman, who expressed himself considerably relieved now that there was another young man on the ground. For as this country only allowed one wife, they could not both marry the Count, and when it came to a final decision, he and Addy feared the consequences might be serious.

"Now, how have you arranged it? who is to be the Countess?"

"Ah, you pest, Norman; you are bent upon marrying us both to someone; and it is not with or by your leave. You had better send for another, for I don't intend to compete for either of these prizes."

And so it appeared. The artist had the run of the house, and spent a great deal of time in Renie's sitting-room. At last Sir Bevis asked whether he found the west wing better lighted, and he replied, "Yes, he did."

So it ended by his studio being fixed there, with the young lady's permission, and fine morning's work used to be gone through with the three friends.

Rufus Sebastain asked Renie to work with him, he had seen a great many of her paintings, and expressed himself astonished, but she declined, because someone might pop in—it was different now he was there.

"Oh, that need not trouble you, Miss

Rudkin, I can do away with that fear by this simple act," and he turned the key.

"But, Mr. Sebastain," remonstrated Renie, " it is scarcely proper for us to be locked in here."

" Scarcely, in the eyes of the world, but we are not in it just now ; in truth I feel quite out of it up here with only the trees, sea, and birds to look at. I am disposed to believe that my salvation would be inevitable did I remain a fixture here ; surroundings have a great deal to do with actions. But don't let that put you out, Miss Rudkin, your uncle is welcome any time he chooses to come, but I cannot say as much for his lady. And I really don't require her, she has sat already twice, and I need no further guide ; as for the boy, why we will have him, because I intend *you* to paint him."

" Mr. Sebastain, I cannot do it, it is your work."

"I know that, but I am not so clever at babies; besides you did 'My Pet' to perfection, and I want this to be the same, and then I shall inform your uncle of the star at the end of his family. They won't question our doings much; besides, there is a party of us—four, with Christie, without counting the child."

"Oh! I was not perplexed about that; if you like to exclude intruders you have a right to, I suppose."

And so the matter ended, and many and many a peal of laughter burst from the open windows of the west wing, and floated out to sea on the breeze. Time passed, and the pictures grew; my lady's portrait was extremely good, and the workmanship perfect. It was nearly finished, and by its side stood another easel, on which reposed the second picture of Rodney. Renie was doing that, but under a faithful promise that Mr.

Sebastain should put his name to it. Again it was a success, and the artist loved to stand and gaze as Renie dashed in the colours. The child was taken holding a kitten in his dimpled arms, and his short petticoats all dragged up, showing the rounded limbs, and garments fringed with delicate lace. There was something so original and perfectly childlike in the unstudied position that it was actually refreshing to the eye.

"There," exclaimed Renie, laying down her brush, "I am tired," and she walked to the window and joined Lucy, who was busy working, under Christie's directions.

Rufus Sebastain did not stop; there was some article of jewellery wanted for my lady's bosom; she was in full dress, and stood like a Queen. Renie admired Lucy's work, and heard Christie's wants and intentions, and then fell into a dream, with her eyes fixed on the waving sea.

It was the end of September, and a change was apparent all around. She heard the artist occasionally break into low snatches of song, and murmur something about "Under the Greenwood Tree," followed immediately by an astonishing ditty, which sounded like "Peter Snout was invited out," etc. This choice effusion had created some amazement in the studio when first heard, but Rufus Sebastain at once apologized, and told how he sung to himself when alone—they were his working songs. And so it seemed, for when he was busiest, or most absorbed, there came a faint "Peter Snout—" And they had got accustomed to it by now. Had Renie not been dreaming that September day she would have seen the artist toss aside his brush and stretch himself, then commence a search on a shelf in a closet for something, and presently with his arms full, get down. There were one or two attempts at "Under the Green-

wood Tree" and "Peter Snout," as a matter of course, which attracted no attention, but the next sound did, and three pairs of eyes instantly turned in his direction.

"Great Heaven!" exclaimed he, starting violently, and every particle of colour fading from his face, "Miss Rudkin, why—where—who's this?"

He held a sketch before him, on which his eyes were fixed.

Renie went and looked over his shoulder, followed by Lucy, needle in hand. It was now their turn to start; he had found the likeness of the lovely Clorinda which Renie had painted after the stolen visit to that solemn chamber, and stowed carefully away on an upper shelf. They gave an hurried look at each other; they must not say who it was on any account.

Lucy was the first to recover herself, and at once replied, indifferently—

"Oh! that is one of Renie's fancies."

"A fancy face, not taken from the original," murmured Rufus Sebastain, more to himself than to them.

Then, turning to Renie, with a wan smile on his white face, he said—

"Your brain is full of strange fancies, Miss Rudkin, and this is the strangest of all, because it finds its echo in mine. This face fascinates, bewitches me; it reminds me of—but there, never mind; if I tell you you will only laugh," and he put the sketch down and left the room.

He did not know how far from laughing either of the girls were, or how quickly Renie picked it up and put it under lock and key.

"I don't think I shall indulge in any more fancies of that sort, Lucy."

"No, indeed! I hope you won't," replied Lucy, speaking her mind, for Christie had left the room. "I trembled for the secret, Renie;

fortunately he was so much upset that he never asked a direct question, else we should have been obliged to tell a direct lie. Your poor lost aunt was a lovely creature without doubt, but yet her face does not bewitch *me*. But men see what women don't, that's a fact. I wonder if she is like his lost love. I have often noticed him sad. No doubt it is a case of blighted affection, like all the rest of romantic individuals."

"Perhaps," slowly answered Renie.

She was recollecting his sorrowful story told under the trees the first night he came. There certainly had been no mention of a love, and for that very reason no doubt there was one, so she held her peace. That story was not to be repeated, so Lucy must be left to wonder over his past career. Renie could not quite comprehend the inducement that made her his confidant; certainly his trust was not misplaced, and she felt interested and kindly

disposed towards the struggling artist. No harm could arise out of their friendship. No; it was purely Platonic. Renie was quite satisfied, and, half smiling, commenced to put aside the things.

END OF VOL. I.

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